COMEDY AND THE CRITICS

A Survey of the Reception of Dickens's Comic Fiction

1836 - 1906

by

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To My Parents.

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Abbreviations

All page numbers referred to are placed in parenthesis with the dates of articles and books. If more than one page reference is necessary, the first reference is placed with the date and subsequent references are placed in separate parentheses. The titles of periodicals are repeated, but for books, the title is given the first time and thereafter only the author's name and date of publication are given. Philip Collins's Dickens: the Critical Heritage (1971) is an invaluable source of reprints, and for the sake of brevity, all references to it are indicated merely by adding "Collins" in the parentheses where it is necessary.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the critical reception of Dickens's comedy, from 1836 to 1906 and, in separate chapters, discusses four major critical concerns.

The central demand of the critics is that fiction should be somehow true to human experience, and Dickens's comic scenes and characters do not always receive the critics' approval. When the demand is rigidly enforced, Dickens's work is rejected as exaggeration and caricature, but his comedy forces many critics to relax their restrictions, and there are a number of more flexible approaches which recognise in his work some kind of comic heightening of reality. At best, his comedy is felt to be a kind of idealism which requires a high degree of imaginative involvement, and towards the end of the period there is a feeling that what he lacks in realism seems to be compensated for by the originality and vividness of his art.

There is some unease among the critics that comedy may do no more than amuse readers, and early critics in particular constantly point the moral of his humour and praise the satires for their practical effectiveness. There is later some disillusionment with Dickens's role as a moral teacher and reformer, and especially after his death, his alleged over-concern for effect is felt to be clumsy and unintelligent. An increasing desire for intellectual satisfaction leads some critics to reject him as an over-emotional writer who at best cheers his readers but offers them no "philosophy." Only a few critics in the period claim for him any weightier intellectual appeal.

There is much interest in the author as a person, and his moral qualities and faculties of mind are often deduced from his works. He is always popular as a genial lover of his fellowmen, but to a section of

the critics he appears uncultured and lacking in the intellectual power required to be more than a mere humorist. Forster's biography reveals new personal details and helps perpetuate the kind of criticism which insists on explaining the literary in terms of the author's character and experience. Dickens's comedy is generally felt to be a highly personal art, both in its successes and in its failures.

Much of the criticism is ultimately directed at an evaluation of Dickens's stature as a writer. The majority of the critics agree that he is a great comic writer, but his stature as an artist is often held in doubt. He is recognised as being excellent in his own field of comedy, but there is often a feeling that a comic artist is not, after all, a serious artist.

Each chapter works towards Chesterton's Charles Dickens (1906) because he is the most important of the critics who insist on the seriousness of Dickens's art yet do not lose sight of its essential comic nature. In a sense, the study works back from 1906 to discover what previous critics had said about the comedy of Dickens, but in a sense too, it works forward from 1836 to show that what concerned early critics is still of concern in Chesterton's time.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Because of his comedy, Dickens did not always seem to his contemporary critics to be a serious writer, and even though his resolve to be more than a source of amusement and entertainment was evident from the first, there is often some discomfort among the critics, depending on their attitudes to comedy in general or to his comedy in particular. As I shall show, comedy is recognised by them as an important - often as the most characteristic - element of his fiction, and there is at times a self-conscious air about their attempts to reconcile it with what they consider to be the concerns of "serious" art. I use the term "comedy" here in a general sense to include, as comic "modes," humour, wit, satire, farce, irony, fun, burlesque, and so on. This usage is a matter of convenience, and my intention is not to become embroiled in a tortuous consideration of how these terms ought to be used, but to examine how they were used by nineteenth century critics in their dealings with a great and versatile comic artist. That is, this thesis has as its subject critical practice rather than theory, although a number of theoretical considerations are bound up in it.

Before examining their usage, a brief introduction to the critics themselves, and an examination of their working conditions is necessary. During Dickens's career, most of those whose articles I shall examine were in full - or part-time employment for one or more of the numerous Reviews, magazines, newspapers or other kinds of periodical which already existed at the beginning of Dickens's career or came into being during it. They may have had other professions - in parliament, in law, in literary endeavour itself - but they undertook to review books for the periodicals[1]

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[1]As a simple cover-all term, I shall use this, even though it does not fit all of the types of publication with which I am concerned. And I shall, for variety, also use the word "journal" similarly.

either occasionally, or for each issue, week by week, month by month, or whatever. Although I shall continue, for want of a better term, to call them critics, often they were not literary critics in the modern sense of the term, but rather book reviewers. It was as much their job to summarise the plot and give typical extracts as it was to interpret and evaluate, and they wrote for the general public rather than for an audience with a specialised interest in literature. In a way, however, they did write for audiences with specialised interests, because most of the periodicals addressed themselves to a more or less particular social level and adapted their tone and interests to their chosen audience. Many of them, too, were the organs of political and religious groups or at least had affiliations with specialised groups. Extra-literary concerns at times colour criticism of literature, especially when the work under review makes some foray into a periodical's special area of interest. Much of the criticism remained anonymous, and the periodical assumed the responsibility for what was said. How far reviewers were influenced by their periodicals' editorial stances and how much freedom they in fact had as literary critics, is not certain, but it is not my aim here to consider such a question. Indeed, although I name critics where possible, I do not take any great interest in the critics as individuals unless there is a special need to do so, because my primary intention is to consider their ideas in relation to those of others. There are far too many critics included in the survey for one to be concerned over-much with individuals.

Not all of those with whom I am concerned are reviewers of Dickens's works, but most of them, whether they write general articles of interest on some aspect of his work as a whole, whether they compose literary histories which include chapters on Dickens, whether they are biographers or whether they are novelists themselves, are of a class that may loosely be termed men of letters[2] rather than literary critics proper. Even

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[2] See J.J. Gross, The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters (1969).

when they do not write for a periodical with a definite editorial standpoint, many of them have their own standpoints: criticism is riddled by such things as aristocratic bias, Oxbridgean contempt, literary partisanship, personal antagonism and so on. Despite an increasing interest in and achievement of theory of fiction,[3] the critical world to be surveyed below is markedly different from the modern.

Because of the nature of much nineteenth-century criticism, many critics do not have our interest in exactitude of terminology. Because they are often journalists as much as critics and might be accused of pedantry by an unsympathetic public, they rarely offer definitions of their terms but rely on their readers' understanding of what they mean. R.B. Martin[4] claims that there is a growing interest in the state of English comedy around the late 1860s and continuing into the 1870s, and that there is an increasing preference for the more intellectual mode of wit over what was regarded as the emotional mode of humour. He finds a large number of articles on the subject of comedy in the 1870s in particular, and if his suggestion of an increased interest in definition is correct, it ties in with the advancing tendency to theorise about fiction and explains the fact that there are, later in the period to be surveyed, more attempts to describe what is meant by humour and by Dickens's humour in particular. Martin's general thesis, that there is emphasis on intellectual comedy later in the century, is also explainable by a greater emphasis on the intellectual aspects of fiction than there had been in the mid-Victorian period. But the intellectualism of the later period has its roots in the 1850s and 1860s, and there is a preference for wit above humour discernable occasionally during Dickens's career. Be the reason what it may, Dickens is early known as a humorist,

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[3] Examined in particular by Richard Stang, The Theory of the Novel in England 1850-1870 (1959) and Kenneth Graham, English Criticism of the Novel 1865-1900 (1965)

[4] The Triumph of Wit (1974) pp. 38 ff.

and especially after his death he is known particularly as such, and there are more frequent attempts than there had been to "define" [5] Dickens's humour and humour in general. But even if many critics do not often define their terms, they use words like "humour," "wit," "satire," "fun," "farce," "grotesque" and "caricature" in fairly consistent ways, and a brief consideration of them is necessary.

Some of them may be dispatched quickly. "Farce" is often a derogatory term linked to a cheap kind of drama noted for its extravagances, its impossibilities and its general purpose of a simple kind of amusement. As such, the word offers to adverse critics a quick and concise method of denoting stature, but towards the end of the period the term becomes neutralised a little, and W.L. Cross, in The Development of the English Novel (1899, p.189)[6], is able to say that at times farce is held in restraint by Dickens, in which cases he achieves pure comedy. Gissing, in Charles Dickens : a Critical Study (1902[7], p.202) accepts that Dickens writes farce at times, and characterises it as a comic mode which merely seeks to amuse. Another term which may be pejorative because it suggests an intention merely to amuse, is "fun." Its most notorious appearance for this purpose is in G.H. Lewes's article in the Fortnightly Review (February 1872)[8], but many critics wishing to demote Dickens as a comic writer to the status of a mere amuser of the public, use it in this way.

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[5] There are few "definitions" in a strict sense of the term, but for want of a better word, I shall continue to describe them as such.

[6] In order to reduce the need for footnotes and to make all references concise, I place the page number thus together with title and date. Full details of page numbers of articles and chapters are included in the Bibliography. Since the titles of books are usually long, I shall not repeat them after their first mention. This source will therefore be cited hitherto as Cross (1899, p.189).

[7] Substantially the same as the original (1898) edition, except in pagination.

[8] See below, p.302.

Such terms are pejorative especially when the kinds of comedy they denote are all that are attributed to Dickens. Even Forster would not have denied that there was fun in Dickens's works, but he becomes incensed when it is suggested that that is all there is to his comedy. A further term, used less often, is "buffoonery." This suggests that Dickens does no more than make merry in order to steal a laugh from the public. For example, W. Sargent, in the North American Review (October 1853, p.421), feels that Dickens too often descends from the level of his own dignity and is "careless, apparently, as the buffoon in the ring, whether he is laughed with or laughed at." The use of such terms depends, in many cases, on the critic's motive. He may be describing an element of the works of Dickens, and a purely critical motive should not be discounted, but at the same time, his purpose may be to ridicule Dickens as a comic writer or as an artist generally. "Burlesque" and "low comedy" are terms which carry similar adverse connotations, partly connected with popular theatre, and in the case of the second term, reinforced by class prejudice. Low comedy describes low life and unexalted personages. Such terms are bound up closely with the questions of truth and stature and are discussed further in Chapters One and Four below.

There are, in addition, words which may refer to the comic but do not necessarily do so -"extravagance," "grotesque," "caricature" and "exaggeration" are the most common. They appear frequently in criticisms of Dickens and most commonly with intent to decry, because they all refer to art that is somehow not true to life or to human nature. Indeed, there is a hint of ugliness in some of them, and whether comic or not, such elements of art are rejected because they are repulsive. An aesthetic objection to them is that they spoil the harmony of the art. Most critics have in mind the creator of fictional character as a kind of portrait painter. The portrait painter would never over-colour part of his picture or exaggerate any single aspect of his subject's appearance.

Certainly he would not make his subject appear ugly. It was a matter of proportion and total effect, and the literary artist was expected to abide by similar rules. But there are many objections to the lack of truthfulness of caricature. The fictional portrait is compared to life, and exaggeration is rejected, as I shall show in Chapter One. Dickens creates non-comic caricatures and grotesques as well as comic ones, and there is a possibility that I may discuss a critic's use of such terms when he is not talking specifically about the comedy. The policy I have used in the selection of critical statements here and in all other cases is as follows. Comments definitely about comedy are, obviously, included. General discussions of Dickens's characterisation which make use of comic characters as examples may be included, as may general discussions of Dickens's art which have implications, at the time or at other stages of the period, for the reception of his comedy. This may appear to allow too much liberty, but if a particular critic is not concerned with the comic I shall, where necessary, point it out. That comedy is not always separable from the non-comic in fiction is no doubt a truism, but a consideration of the critics' use of the major terms which denote the comic will show that, in the period to be surveyed, the comic is related regularly to a number of non-comic elements.

More specifically, however, it is humour that is most interesting. Satire is rarely defined - most critics seem to assume that everybody knows what satire is, and moreover they are largely interested in discussing the satirist's fairness and the effects of his attacks. Indeed, many of the critics later in Dickens's career who become upset by the alleged unfairness of his satire, seem to forget that it is a comic mode at all, and spend much of their time in retaliation against the satirist and his alleged opinions and injustice. Even those who admire his work are more interested in the instruction and practical effects that may result from it. There is a latent distrust for the satirist, best seen

in the English Review's description (December 1848, pp.259-60) of satire as "basely negative humour." The critic obviously has in mind a particular kind of satire rather than the mode in general, and he objects to it as a power which corrodes the heart and corrupts within. Dickens, in contrast to Thackeray at times, some critics claim, is early regarded as a kindly and genial satirist who points out the follies of mankind but does not become misanthropical and shows his love for his fellowmen rather than his contempt. As will become clear in the descriptions of humour, this is a mixture of humour with satire, and in his later novels Dickens is sometimes seen to fail because he no longer includes this more attractive element and seems to become bitter. This complaint is made quite early by John Eagles, in Blackwood's Magazine (October 1848, p.468), and later critics do not laugh at the satires so much as earnestly discuss the truthfulness and effectiveness of Dickens's attacks on institutions.

A certain kind of wit may also be disliked. S.F. Williams, in the Rose, Shamrock and Thistle (IV 1864, p.73) says that "wit may be associated with the false and superficial," and he adds that humour is preferred because it is "always allied to the deep and true." Humour is "related to the heart, while wit never has that affection and charity which are attributes of the heart." There is little dispute over the relative qualities of wit and humour because it seems to be assumed that Dickens is a humorist rather than a wit, and although on occasions a particular piece of wittiness is praised in his work, the term "wit" appears most frequently in discussions in which the critics are attempting to ascertain the qualities of humour. For much of Dickens's career, humour is the preferable mode because of its relation to "the heart," and after emphasis on the feelings had worn off, humour was still popular in certain critical sectors because of its appeal to the sympathies and the charity of the reader.

But humour is also used as a general term in the way I use "comedy". This creates some confusion because at the same time as they are attempting to define or describe the term, critics occasionally use it in a general sense. The reviewer in the English Review quoted above used "humour" as a general term, as does a writer in the Ecclesiastic and Theologian (October 1855, p.472), who says, "Great as are Mr. Dickens's powers of humour, he has rarely used them for purposes of satire." The tendency may be seen much later in the period. In the Spectator (7 February 1874, p.170), R.H. Hutton, having defined humour in an earlier article which I shall presently discuss, and having in this article followed up his earlier definition, nevertheless seems to use the term in a general sense when he includes "the presence of mind (which is the soul of wit) displayed in his satire" among a number of qualities which make Dickens "such a humourist as many centuries are not likely to reproduce." Thus Hutton, who uses the term very carefully, as a rule, and St. John Topp, in the Melbourne Review (July 1881, p.280), who is not so skilful a critic, both use the term in a general sense. Topp says that "Dickens's humour assumes many forms. It is present in good farce or burlesque as much as in good comedy." Sometimes, Topp continues, "it is of the highest order of comedy, sometimes playfully satirical, sometimes broadly farcical" and so on. Yet humour is frequently seen as a specific comic mode with special characteristics of its own, and because of the nature of much of his comedy and of his art in general, Dickens is usually referred to as a humorist. This may be illustrated at great length, but since many of the descriptions of humour encroach upon topics considered later, I shall do no more than indicate the kinds of qualities expected of humour during the period.

The first kind of quality, and probably the most commonly expected, is, broadly, emotional. The Christian Examiner (November 1839, p.171) says that humour is found in "the most loving souls" and that it exists

in "intimate connexion with the pathetic." As S.F. Williams, quoted above, says, humour is related to the heart, and not so much to the intellect, which is the preserve of wit. Humour is often linked to pathos, especially in the first half of the century, but also in later years, sometimes with intent to decry the humorist's over-emotional qualities. Humour and pathos are so closely linked that they seem to go naturally together, and at times the two modes are in danger of losing their separate qualities. John Hollingshead, in The Train (August 1857, p.76), praising the novels after Pickwick Papers, and especially The Old Curiosity Shop, says that Dickens shows his "command over the emotions of his readers, provoking tears and laughter at the same moment,- a power that only falls to the lot of the pure humorist." After the period of unreserved acceptance of smiles and tears had passed, and maudlin pathos became the subject of ridicule, critics still discuss the mixture of humour and pathos because in their opinion one element tones down or dignifies the other. Mrs. Oliphant, in Blackwood's Magazine (June 1871, p.675) says that it is the boast of the humorist to mingle smiles and tears, but finds that, in Dick Swiveller, for example, the pathetic touch dignifies and deepens the laughter, and makes humour out of what otherwise would be mere "fun." Theodore Hunt, in Representative English Prose and Prose Writers (1887, p.458), says that the highest forms of humour contain an element of pathos, which gives seriousness and richness to it, but the humour in turn controls the pathos and prevents it from becoming sickly. In the later decades of the century, pathos is definitely out of fashion and Dickens's most valuable quality is felt to be his humour, but even so, there are some genuine tributes to his excellence as a pathetic writer, and the two elements of his art are still discussed together by Gissing (1902), who has a chapter entitled "Humour and Pathos" in which, at last, he feels he is able to speak with unstinted

praise. There is some feeling in this that the combination of the two elements is particularly early-Victorian, but Gissing nevertheless accepts without decrying it. A less emotionally-charged concept of humour remains to satisify the "intellectual" critics of later decades. George Stott, in the Contemporary Review (February 1869, p.220), says that great humour always has an undercurrent of sadness, and Andrew Lang, who dislikes Dickens's pathos, speaks, in the Fortnightly Review (December 1898, p.959) of the "melancholy" which is, among other things, typical of humour.

Humour is more closely linked with the heart than with the head. Early in the period, it is mentioned as being close to love, and love for his fellowmen is said to be typical of Dickens's work as a humorist, but in the work of less emotional critics, or in less emotional periods, the quality of love is watered down to charity, benevolence, humanity, tolerance, and so on. Often these qualities are said to be possessed by the humorist and expressed through his fiction. The American Christian Examiner (November 1839, p.171) says, during a review of Oliver Twist, "There is a comic side to everything. And there is a fondness of this side of things which is not heartless, and which does not interfere with reverence. Indeed, the perfection of humor, and the most of it will be found in the most earnest and loving souls." Another religious journal, the English Review (December 1848), spends a long time discussing humour and showing how its development over the centuries has been (according to the reviewer) closely linked with the development of Christianity. Freedom, he says, is the "essential element" of humour, and only under the protection and care of the Christian Church have men been free to appreciate it. Humour is stressed above other comic modes. Satire, as I said above, is described as "negative humour," and the reviewer continues to say that "Direct satire

and more especially political satire, deals much with wit, and may deal with fun also, but makes little use of humour.[9] It very rarely bids us laugh. He who loves God and man, supposing him to be possessed of equally sound sense and fertile imagination with the misanthropic thinker, must needs be a far higher humourist" (p.260). The description is prescriptive rather than merely descriptive: what the reviewer means is that other comic modes, especially political satire, ought not to make us laugh and that the loving kind of laughter is the right kind. Thackeray, in his English Humorists (1851, p.13[10]) makes a typical Victorian statement about the humorist:

> The humorous writer proposes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness - your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture - your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy. To the best of his means and ability he comments on all the ordinary actions and passions of life almost. He takes upon himself to be the week-day preacher, so to speak.

This stresses the moral intentions of the humorist, and although other descriptions of humour similar to this might be quoted, the question is best treated in Chapter Two below. Clearly Thackeray uses "humorist" in a general sense, because "scorn for untruth," if it typifies a comic writer at all, seems to belong to the satirist more than the humorist. The highly emotional quality of humour and its beneficent effects are felt to be expressions also of qualities in the humorist, and even in the late-century when greater rational and intellectual content is sought in novels and in comedy, humour is still often regarded as basically an emotional mode. Thackeray, in his lecture on "Charity and Humour" (1857)[11], stresses the proximity of the two elements in his title, and Gissing (1902, p.106) says that humour "is inseparable from charity" and shows the author's tolerance, humility and kindness.

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[9] Here humour is still used as a general term, it seems.

[10] 1949 edition.

[11] Extract in Philip Collins, Dickens: the Critical Heritage (1971, pp.353-55).

The humorist is felt to be good-natured, kindly and humane. Forster, having lived through the Dickens period, carries the kind of attributes thought typical of the humorist into the generation after Dickens's death, in his biography. Humour, he says (Life, II p.273[12]), shows up the "affinities between the high and the low, the attractive and the repulsive, the rarest things and things of every day, which bring us all on the common level of humanity." W.B. Rands,[13], in the Contemporary Review (July 1880, pp. 172 ff.) speaks also of the humanising influence of humour, and its cheerfulness and love. Chesterton, in Charles Dickens (1906, p.130) briefly stresses the kinship of humour and "humanity." Scrooge, he says, is too humorous to be worse than a crusty old bachelor whose inhospitable sentiments are more hearty than misanthropic. His very humourousness makes him humane, and Chesterton suspects him of secretly giving away turkeys all his life. Whether Dickens is the humorist or whether one of his characters has that title, humour is linked to love, benevolence, fellow-feeling, sympathy, charity and humanity.

Because of these emotional and moral qualities, humour is felt to be quite different from wit, and attempts are often made to distinguish one from the other. A typical contrasting of the humorist and the wit appears in the London University Magazine (I, 1842, p.392), where the reviewer says,

> True wit and great comic power are separable qualities, in the latter of which Mr. Dickens more peculiarly excels. It is hard to define where humour ends and wit begins; but, where the smile becomes a loud and hearty laugh, where the fine intellectual discrimination, which is the essence of wit, is less remarkable than the love of the comic in situation or character; and where from the union of this quality with acute powers of minute observation, a tendency to caricature is at all perceptible, humour must be acknowledged to have got the better of wit.

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[12] Revised edition (1969) in two volumes. References are in this form for the sake of brevity.

[13] Rands uses the pseudonym ", Matthew Browne," but I shall use his real name throughout.

"Wit" in one sense means "intelligence," of course, and a man's "humour" in a sense is a personal trait. Probably working ultimately from this distinction, humour is often felt to be concerned with human character, as the emphasis on love and charity suggests. The English Review (December 1848, p.266) claims that Dickens is no wit and says that wit is a less desirable comic mode. It is "as inferior to humour as soap-bubbles to genial nectar. . . . Wit is no more than a curious collocation of apparently dissimilar objects." Humour involves, as he says earlier,[14] the love of God and man, and this leads him to say that humour is "internal" rather than "mainly external." He attempts, with oppositions of this kind, to mark wit and humour off from each other, but is forced, finally, to admit that they are not wholly separate and that "wit may be sometimes found in humour, and even humour in wit." G.F. Talbot, in Putnam's Monthly Magazine (March 1855, pp. 268-69) also attempts to mark off humour from wit because he believes Dickens has the former but not the latter. Wit, he says, is "an effort of the intellect to arrange ideas, conceptions, and pictures of the imagination in such combinations as shall provoke surprise and excite mirth," but humour is "more instinctive; it belongs to the character; it is a quality of the imagination and intellect, giving to their creations and thoughts the original forms of the grotesque and extravagant." Justin McCarthy, in the Westminister Review (October 1864,pp. 418-19) dissents, however, from those who allow Dickens humour but no wit. The distinction between the two comic modes should not, he feels, be pressed too strongly because "they belong to the same family and are related, having some characteristic differences." Such differences "may be expressed in various ways. We may say that wit resides chiefly in the expression; humour in the thought: that we admire the former, and are amused by the

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[14] See above, p 11.

latter; that one depends on the assemblage of ideas which are congruous, the other on the connexion of ideas which are incongruous. But they agree in flowing from a particular turn of thought which enables a writer at once to surprise his hearers and to affect their fancy." As soon as McCarthy attempts to catalogue the opposing qualities of humour and wit - and this is seen in what he says about congruous and incongruous ideas - he runs into the same kind of trouble that the English Review had. The value of Talbot's and McCarthy's attempts at marking the two modes off from each other is that they stress a kind of brain-power in humour, rather than emphasise the emotions involved. The London University Magazine quoted above does not over-stress the emotions, but speaks of the humorist's power of observation and use of caricature. R.H. Horne, in his A New Spirit of the Age (1844, p.42) speaks of Dickens the humorist's knowledge of his characters,[15] and Gissing (1902, p.202) says that humour "always suggests a thought, always throws light on human nature." Humour is often felt to be an emotionally-charged comic mode, less intellectual than wit, and Dickens is at times felt to lack the intellect required for wit,[16] but nobody suggests that there is no intellectual involvement at all. His humour requires knowledge of character and a particular kind of habit of thought, best described by Dickens himself in a letter to Bulwer Lytton, quoted by Forster (Life, II p.273), when he says that it is his "infirmity to fancy or perceive relations in things which are not apparent generally." This raises the idea of incongruity which is from time to time mentioned by the critics. The noting of incongruity does not especially characterise the humorist - it could be said of the

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[15] See below, p. 75.

[16] See below, pp.224,225.

satirist, too, for example - but it allows at least what Saintsbury, in his Corrected Impressions (1895, p.136), calls "a quaint and fantastic habit of brain."

The best attempt at definition made during the period to be surveyed is that of R.H. Hutton, in the Spectator (25 June 1870), in an article entitled "What is Humour?". Hutton says, "We do not believe that there can be found any definition of humour which will hold water for a moment that will either draw a clear and impassable line between wit and humour, or between humour and any other subdivision of the faculty of the ludicrous." Yet Hutton, too, goes on to make a distinction between the intellectuality of wit and the concern of the humorist with human character and with what Hutton calls "personal and subjective feeling." The "faculty of the ludicrous" is characterised generally by its dependence on a sense of incongruity. Wit and humour therefore contain an element of surprise, or, to use Hutton's term, paradox. The difference between a humorist and a wit consists in the "greater degree of sharp intellectual paradox" in wit and the "paradox of personal and subjective feeling" in humour. There is hardly any intellectual involvement in humour, but the humorist passes from one condition of personal feeling to another which is "almost inconceivable in close connection with it (p.777)." The humorist, Hutton says, "always moves on the inner line of impulse and motive . . . always plays on the moral paradoxes of the mind within; while the wit occupies a critical and external position, and makes his play with the cross-purposes and antitheses he discovers in the field of external thought or action." In comic characterisation, therefore, the "most decisive note" of the humorist is "the preference for speaking by the very mouth of the person to be made ludicrous," while the wit has a "preference for launching criticisms at him from the outside." In concluding that there is

"comparatively little of the wit, and a truly astounding amount of the humourist" in Dickens, Hutton reinforces the idea of him as an emotional humorist who lacks high intellectual powers.[17] But in fact he combines the tendencies to see his humour as an emotional kind of comedy and as a faculty of the mind, in saying that the humorist deals with states of feeling and has the power to illustrate oddity at great length and with great variation because of his keen sense of the ridiculous.

One of the main charges made against Dickens as a comic writer is that he exaggerates. As I have already said, this charge is not directed solely at his comedy, but his comedy frequently offends and a number of critics argue that exaggeration is typical either of comedy or of Dickens's comedy at least. The London University Magazine quoted above is among the first to accept that caricature may be essential, and Hutton, in the article discussed, goes on to find (p.778) that the shock of moral paradox which characterises humour is greatest in Dickens's work when he exaggerates.[18] Critics during his career are a little embarrassed by his exaggeration and attempt to argue around the charge, but especially after his death they are inclined to accept it as an essential ingredient of his comic art. Forster (Life II, p.277) says that all humour "has in it, is indeed identical with, what ordinary people are apt to call exaggeration," and Robert Buchanan, in St Paul's Magazine (February 1872, p.146) claims that Dickens's humour is "a very simple matter - merely the knack . . . of seeing crooked - of posing every figure into oddity." St John Topp, in the Melbourne Review (July 1881, p.278) says that "without going more deeply into the subject," humour may be called "the faculty which a writer possesses of evoking

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[17] For further discussion of Hutton's articles, see below, pp.93f., 296-98.

[18] See below, p.94.

mirth or laughter from his readers, whether it be by the exhibition of odd or eccentric characters, the invention of laughable situations, or the bringing into juxtaposition incongruous or grotesque ideas." Again, humour is a general term, because these methods of raising laughter may characterise satire, wit or farce as well as humour. But similar statements may be found throughout the period. The Reverend R.W.G. Hunter, in the Dickensian (January 1906, p.6), for example, says that the "philosophy of humour" is "the odd conjunction of persons and things," which might equally refer to a kind of wit.

Even if a strict definition is not achieved (or even sought, in many cases,) some critics show at least a concern for arriving at some kind of clarification. Frederic Harrison, in Forum (January 1895, p.545) says,"We shall never get an adequate definition of that imponderable term - humour," but he goes on to say that it serves his immediate purpose to agree with Samuel Johnson, that humour is "grotesque imagery," and "grotesque" means "distorted of figure." Humour, therefore, is "an effort of the imagination presenting human nature with some element of distortion or disproportion which instantly kindles mirth. It must be imaginative; it must touch the bed-rock of human nature; it must arouse merriment and not anger or scorn." Some kind of exaggeration is inevitable, but there must be a basic faithfulness to human nature, imaginative rather than simply realistic. Harrison is especially attempting to reconcile Dickens's comedy with the concern for truth which I shall discuss in Chapter One, and because he finds that it is not always sufficiently truthful to nature, he does not give it high artistic stature, a question which I shall discuss in Chapter Four. It is evident that comedy is felt to depend on personal qualities such as the power of observation, the imagination, love, sympathy, and, most obviously, a sense of humour or sense of the ludicrous. These questions are dis-

cussed in Chapter Three below. Comedy also has certain effects - the most obvious of these is that it causes laughter, but there are other effects attributable to the comic, which I shall discuss in Chapter Two below.

W.S. Lilly, in Four English Humorists of the Nineteenth-Century (1895, pp.4-9) is concerned initially with the meaning of the term "humour." The humorist, he says, is "an artist who playfully gives us his intuition of the world and human life." The only difference between a humorist and any other kind of great artist is this "playfulness," and the humorist must have the other qualities which distinguish a great artist - imagination, knowledge of human nature, and so on. This reduces the comic to a level of lesser importance than the "artistic." Art is felt to be something to which the comic must be subordinated. Not all of the critics in the period suggest this as simply as Lilly does, but Dickens's comedy poses problems for them in their attempts to evaluate his art. At worst, it aims merely to amuse, but Dickens obviously aimed to do more than that in his early works, and he combined serious purposes with his comedy. Critics attempt to dignify the comic by attaching it to concerns such as morality, which have little to do with its purely comic nature. Comedy needs to be reconciled with the important demands made of fiction, and it is evaluated according as it most satisfies those demands. The more Dickens is seen as a comic writer -a view of him that increases during the period surveyed - the more important is it that his comedy should be so reconciled. It is his strongest element, and if that fails to satisfy the critics, then his art may founder with it. The impulse is towards evaluation of his work, and because comedy is seen as an important aspect of Dickens's novels, this often means that it is evaluated first and his work as a whole is judged according to the critics' assessment of the comedy.

This thesis, examining nineteenth-century attitudes to Dickens's comedy, has some relevance to the century's attitudes to comedy generally,

but my primary aim is to examine the critics' reception of a single author, the greatest comic writer that the age produced. Basically, I am attempting to determine how important they thought comedy was in Dickens's art and in fiction generally. The second of these questions may only be answered with a full study of the reception of other comic novelists, but the reception of comedy in Dickens's fiction indicates some trends which may be observable elsewhere, and shows how far Dickens was a special case because of the peculiar nature of his comedy. Although the whole of this study may be seen in part as an attempt to show how important the critics of the period thought Dickens's comedy was, I shall briefly survey their comments on its importance to show that many of them felt that it was the most attractive and the most successful element of his fiction. Later chapters may add the qualifications to such a simple generalisation.

The Importance of Comedy

What was thought to be the importance of comedy in Dickens in the period under review may be illustrated in several ways, and it is sometimes equally important to note that comedy is placed alongside other, non-comic qualities. Early critics are struck by the appearance of an original and appealing comic writer. The Court Magazine (April 1837, Collins p.33) notes a new "appetite for the jocose" in the "literary public," which is put down to Dickens's leadership in Pickwick Papers. The impact of the comedy of this novel is evident on even a most cursory reading of early reviews; and it remains the comic novel of the century, and is recognised by almost every subsequent critic as Dickens's highest achievement as a comic writer - some would say his highest achievement as an artist generally. In Pickwick Papers, but more clearly in Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby and The Old Curiosity Shop, Dickens shows that he intends to be much more than just a source of amusement,

and his other endeavours do not go unnoticed. His versatility is often paid tribute in admiring lists of his qualities. Typical of these is that of G.H. Lewes,[19] in the National Magazine and Monthly Critic (December 1837, Collins p.66). He says, "If asked by what peculiar talent is Boz characterized we find ourselves at a dead fault - if we feel inclined to say, startling fidelity of observation, his wit and humour rise before us, and compel us to pause," and the way out of the problem is to conclude that Dickens is characterised by a combination of the qualities which are listed earlier in the article (Collins p.65), namely "the nicety of observation, the fineness of tact, the exquisite humour, the wit, heartiness, sympathy with all things good and beautiful in human nature, the perception of character, the pathos, and accuracy of description." Forster, reviewing Barnaby Rudge and The Old Curiosity Shop in the Examiner (4 December 1841, p.772), claims that these works display Dickens's "best qualities," which are, "the decisive grasp of reality with which character and circumstance are seized; the discernment of good in its least attractive forms, and of evil in its most captivating disguises; the cordial wisdom and sound heart; the wit and humour, luxuriant, yet under right control." Similar lists of qualities appear frequently in later criticisms. In the London Review (28 October 1865, Collins p. 454), the reviewer finds that, contrary to reported opinion, Dickens has not "out-written himself," and "his fancy, his pathos, his humour, his wonderful powers of observation, his picturesqueness and his versatility, are as remarkable now as they were twenty years ago." And near the end of the period to be surveyed, Richard Graham, in The Masters of Victorian Literature (1897, p.21), says that the "characteristic qualities of this genius" are his "astonishing faculty of observation, his fertility of invention, his inexhaustible humour, and pathos." Clearly, Dickens is felt to be more than just a comic writer, but some reference to his comedy appears in all such lists, which shows its

[19] Attributed to Lewes by Collins (op.cit).

importance. There is almost always some reference to his accuracy of observation, to his individualisation of character or his heightening of reality, and to his pathos to at least some kind of moral or emotional quality; and many of the aspects mentioned are personal qualities, at least potentially.

From the preceding survey of the critics' use of the terms, it is clear that Dickens's humour is felt to be his most important characteristic. Because "humour" is often used in a general sense, I shall continue to use the word "comedy," but most critics see humour as being one of Dickens's prime characteristics, and there is a growing tendency to see it as his most important quality. Early in his career, his moral characteristics and his powers of accurate observation may be said to be equally important, or more so, and as I have briefly shown but will show later in more detail, these are inextricably linked with his humour or with other aspects of his comedy. Either because a term such as "humour" is understood to include such elements or because Dickens is seen as a "mere" humorist, an amusing writer and no more, towards the end of his career and especially in the generation after his death, humour comes to be seen as his prime characteristic.

At first, humour is frequently linked closely with pathos and where the two elements are not confused with each other, Dickens is felt to be as good in one as in the other. Indeed, the Spectator (20 February 1836, p. 182), reviewing Sketches by Boz,goes so far as to say, "Humour, we venture to think, is not his forte . . . . We suspect that his strength lies in pathos, if he would eschew over-elaboration." The Globe (8 June 1836) notes, however, that pathos and comedy alternate in Pickwick Papers, and the reviewer says that this shows "that the writer's forte does not lie exclusively in one vein, and that if he has by inclination passed from 'grave to gay,' he can retrace his steps at

will 'from lively to severe.'" A mixture is what is liked most, however, and it is this that makes Dick Swiveller popular with reviewers, from the one in the Western Times (Exeter, 6 March 1841) to the otherwise antagonistic Margaret Oliphant in Blackwood's Magazine (June 1871, pp.684-85). Although maudlin pathos is not liked in the generation after Dickens's death, and there is a general demand for more "rational" entertainment, the mixture of humour and pathos has still some appeal because one element tones down the other: the humour makes the pathos bearable, and the pathos in turn holds the humour in restraint. Forster, (Life, II p.296), emphasises the importance of the blend in Dickens's work, and its truth to life, when he says that "Dr Marigold's Prescriptions" "expressed as perfectly as anything he has ever done, that which constitutes in itself very much of the genius of all his writing, the wonderful neighbourhood, in this life of ours, of serious and humorous things; the laughter close to pathos, but never touching it with ridicule." Pathos is a kind of "seriousness," and the comic modes which could be thus attached to a more serious element were given a dignity in the eyes of the critic's that "lower" comic modes such as farce or fun did not have.

Dickens's pathos is sometimes ridiculed later in the century, but an early instance of ridicule appears in the Queen's Magazine (I, 1842, p.103), where J.M. Rymer sarcastically says that Dickens's claim to be a writer of pathos reminds him of the comic actor Liston's attempt to become a tragedian.[20] His appearance on stage as Hamlet was greeted with roars of laughter from the audience,which only grew louder when he went forward to the footlights and solemnly exclaimed, "I am serious." But of course, much depends on the critic's willingness to find seriousness - a psychiatrist might, perhaps, see a preference for slapstick comedy as the symptom of latent aggression. And much depends on the critic's

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[20] This example is also used by the Saturday Review (4 July 1857, p.15), protesting against Dickens's attempts to become a social reformer.

willingness to laugh - to read some accounts of Dickens's moral purpose in the creation of Pecksniff or some of the political objections to the Circumlocution Office would make one wonder whether the fiction was comic at all. Dickens's reputation as a comic writer often suffers from those who will not laugh and from those who will only laugh.

Rather perversely, Rymer's comment suggests the importance of Dickens's humour, and there are innumerable other testimonies to its importance. The mere fact that very few critics fail to say something about it indicates their awareness of its position in his work, but many of the critics state clearly that it is a highly important, or that it is the most important aspect of his work. As expected, reviewers of Pickwick Papers pay handsome tribute to it, but even after Dickens's other powers were more amply displayed in the following novels, the importance of humour is noted. For example,"J.S.D.," in the American Christian Examiner (November 1839, p.170), reviewing Oliver Twist, enthuses: "Of the humour of 'Boz' we cannot trust ourselves to say the fitting word. It seems to be the natural posture of his mind. All his thoughts flow out in humour. All his portraits are steeped in it. Over all his descriptions hovers this quaint presiding genius." The ubiquitousness of comedy is suggested also by William Howitt, in the People's Journal (3 June 1846, Collins p.205), who says, "Everyone feels instantly the keen eye which he has for the ludicrous in every character, and the uncontrollable tendency to have his laugh at it." Such statements may give the impression that the reviewers believe Dickens is nothing more than a comic novelist, but as was seen in the survey of critical usage, statements like that of the Christian Examiner implicitly see Dickens as more than a comic writer. Horne (1844, p.40) says that humour is his most prominent characteristic, but it is not his highest because moral teaching is more important than amusement, but most of those who use the term mean something more by it than just the power to amuse, which is

signified by terms such as "fun." It is therefore a matter of stature that Dickens is a humorist more than a mere jester, and I shall discuss this in Chapter Four below.

Some comedy - most often humour - is expected of Dickens, however, and there is usually some disappointment in contemporary reviewers of the novels and other works when they do not find it. Thus, The Times (1 June 1846), reviewing Pictures from Italy, "did not expect learning, but . . . did look for fun," and the reviewer expresses his disappointment. The reviewer of Martin Chuzzlewit, in Brother Jonathan (29 July 1843[21]), misses all the "real genuine humor and jollity" of Pickwick Papers, and hopes that the author's "natural fun" will soon reappear. A more prolonged lament over the absence of "Pickwickian" humour and fun in later novels, especially in Little Dorrit and Bleak House, is made in E.B. Hamley's "Remonstrance with Dickens" in Blackwood's Magazine (April 1857). During the lament, Hamley says (p.497): "when, at long intervals, we see a bit of the old rich natural humour, we groan over it as travellers who love wine groan over the scattered vines of Madeira," and a similar comment appears in the review of Great Expectations in the Dublin University Magazine (December 1861, Collins p.435), where the reviewer says that "the old rich humour shines wan and watery through an ever-deepening film of fancies farfetched or utterly absurd." Humour is felt to be typical of Dickens as well as the thing he does best, and such statements may be found in later criticisms. Lang, in Good Words (April 1888, p.237) finds the humour of A Tale of Two Cities poor, and in the Fortnightly Review (December 1898, p.957) he says the novel is not "true" Dickens because his humour is veiled. Gissing (1902, p.67), speaking of the same novel, says that Dickens aimed at writing a story for the story's sake, "the one thing he had never yet been able to do." He therefore cut out humour "among

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[21] repr. Dickensian (April 1914, pp. 97-99), p.99.

other presumed superfluities," and Gissing feels too much restraint in the novel and misses "the best of [his] author."

A tactic used by contemporary critics when the comedy is not so obvious is to insist that the art is better. Reviewing Our Mutual Friend, in The Times (29 November 1865, p.6), E.S. Dallas says that if it is not as funny as Pickwick Papers, it is better "in all the higher qualities of a novel," and the American E.P. Whipple, in the Atlantic Monthly (May 1867, Collins p.482) says similarly that Our Mutual Friend shows that "thought and experience" have given greater depth "even to his humorous vein." While many critics go to great lengths to show that there is depth in Dickens's humour and that he does satisfy some of the requirements of art made by criticism, these comments suggest that his humour was indeed clumsy and shallow, and that Dickens is at last improving as an artist. Dallas, reviewing Great Expectations, in The Times (17 October 1861, p.6), protests mildly against those who think that Dickens has failed if he is not as funny as he once was, and says that for those who see Dickens as chiefly a humorist, the novel will be more welcome than recent works which were found disappointing in that respect. One of the strongest opponents of recent works is Fitzjames Stephen, who hails Great Expectations, in the Saturday Review (20 July 1861, p.69), as a return to the sprightliness and fun of the earlier novels, but his motive in doing so is to criticise obliquely the recent works in which he felt that Dickens went beyond his powers of amusing the public. The difference between Dallas and Stephen is immense: Dallas admires Dickens as an artist but does not rate the comedy highly , while Stephen dislikes Dickens as an artist and rates the comedy highly because it limits Dickens to the lowest kind of art, in his eyes. Because of a kind of embarrassment among Dickens's supporters that he is a comic novelist, and therefore inherently not serious, in many critics' opinions, they attempt to dignify his art in a number of ways.

Quite early in Dickens's career, C.C. Felton says, in the North American Review (January 1843, Collins p.131), that although to many people "the very name of Boz suggests a thousand comical traits, and he is generally regarded as chiefly to be praised for wit and humour," this is so far from being the case that it is necessary to point out a few "more serious aspects of his genius." Felton does not deny the comedy, but he diverts his readers' attention away from it partly because it is a reviewer's job to encourage the public to seek more in fiction than mere amusement. Felton goes on to speak of Dickens's moral instructiveness and his artistic qualities. This is a deliberate shifting of attention from the comic to the non-comic, but because of the kinds of ways in which "humour" is defined and because of the critics' interest in morality and the uses of fiction, shifts of focus of this kind are not always deliberate, as will be seen in Chapter Two. Later in the century, the heavy moral emphasis wears off a little, and there seems to be no need to worry about seeking amusement in books. Especially in a time of morose literature, Dickens's novels became valued as sources of cheerfulness. As Clement Shorter says in his Victorian Literature (1897, p.43), those who object to technical deficiencies in his art and who, for one reason or another, deride his work, are "a mere drop in the ocean of readers," and most people have enjoyed his novels as "an aid to cheery optimism." But such an emphasis attributes to the novels little more than Lewes's attribution to them of "fun." There is always a danger that anyone who admires Dickens for his humour is likely to be either not taking Dickens seriously himself or accused of not taking him seriously. Andrew Lang, in his various articles on Dickens, pays particular tribute to his humour, but he is twitted for this by W.E. Henley, in Views and Reviews (1902, pp.1-3), who says that Lang decries Dickens's pathos, melodrama and bad plots then attacks those who "cannot read Dickens." Henley points out that Lang is "half the ideal of his own denunciation,"

and goes on to show that Dickens did care for his art and should be read as an artist and not merely as an entertainer. But again, the suggestion seems to be that artistic excellence does not have much to do with excellence as a comic writer.

Yet, in turning elsewhere to find an acceptable kind of excellence, the critics do not deny the importance of comedy in Dickens's work, and there are many who make explicit reference to it. Two comic modes in particular are paid the greatest attention : satire and humour. The satires are frequently discussed, as will be evident from later chapters, and satire is so much expected of Dickens that, as I shall show, critics begin to find it in all sorts of places where modern critics may not look[22] for it. But his later satires are unpopular with some critics, and it is as a humorist that Dickens becomes most widely valued. To admit admiration for the later satires would be to stir up controversy, and although the early satires remain popular, Dickens is often enough seen to be such a failure in his later efforts as to tarnish his reputation as a satirist. As a humorist, however, he was seldom so harshly criticised. He was seen to have faults, but these were felt to be tolerable in a humorist, who aimed for no literary heights. After his death, when there was needed a label with which to describe him, he was more and more dubbed a humorist above all. While he was alive and still writing, there was no such great need for a label because there was continuing evidence of his humour and no need for reminders of it, and moreover, his versatility was such that even if his humour seemed to be in decline there was always a chance that he would return to it or turn to some completely different style of fiction. There is much recognition of the importance of his humour during his career, as some of the comments

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[22] See below, pp.133, 136-37.

already quoted show. G.F. Talbot, in Putnam's Monthly Magazine (March 1855, p.269), says that it is "the pith and worth" of Dickens's works, although he links it to other qualities such as the imagination,[23] love, sympathy and charity, and both the English Review (December 1848) and Masson, in the North British Review (May 1851) pay strong attention to humour in Dickens's work. Justin McCarthy, in the Westminster Review (October 1864, p.417), says it is his "most important and distinctive" quality, although he spends most of his article showing that Dickens has few other high qualities and that he will not retain fame as a classic English novelist. That it is felt that humour is important in Dickens does not mean that it is felt to be important in itself.

Two strong champions of Dickens's humour are Forster and Hutton. Forster conducts his famous dispute with Taine and Lewes (Life, II pp.272 ff.) to prove that Dickens has humour- "his highest faculty," according to Forster - rather than mere fun, as Lewes suggested, and Forster goes on to show how humour is truthful and imaginative and therefore artistically acceptable. Hutton does not claim such literary excellence for the humorist, but he says that as a humorist Dickens outshines even Shakespeare[24] because humour is Dickens's best and greatest characteristic. He says this repeatedly in his articles in the Spectator from 1869 to the end of the period surveyed, and in part, his attitude becomes common. Dickens has his limitations and his deficiencies, but to concentrate too much on them is to miss his excellences. As Frederic Harrison says, in Forum (January 1895, p.553), if "we mean Charles Dickens to live," we must fix our eyes upon his "supreme gifts" - that is, that "in certain elements of humour he has no equal and no rival." Earlier Harrison says (p.545) that Dickens is "before all things" a humorist,

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[23] See above, p.13.

[24] See below, p.297.

and there are similar comments in profusion throughout the generation after Dickens's death. A literary historian such as Henry Nicoll, in Landmarks of English Literature (1883, p.384), says that humour "stands out most prominent" in his works; a prolific writer such as Lang, in Letters to Dead Authors (1886, p.16), says the comic characters are assuredly Dickens's best, and in Good Works (April 1888, p.235), says that humour is his forte; and the influential book by Gissing (1902)[25] contains the opinion (p.197) that humour is Dickens's supreme quality, and that it is the "soul" of his work (p.198). Like the soul of man, Gissing says, it "permeates a living fabric which, but for its creative breath, could never have existed." However, Vida Scudder, in Social Ideals in English Letters (1898, p.128), though admitting that "Dickens's humor is real, and mere contagious high spirits do much to preserve him," adds, "yet humor, like salt, can keep a good thing alive, but cannot long lend interest to a poor one." Artistic excellence lies elsewhere, and Scudder finds it in his "social delineation," but many critics seek artistic excellence elsewhere, even if they do not seek it in the same place that Scudder does.

George Eliot, in the Westminster Review (July 1856, Collins p.343), also sees Dickens's humour as a "precious salt" which leads him to describe external traits which serve "in some degree, as a corrective to his frequently false psychology." She recognises that Dickens's comic art suggests what Forster calls the "inner and unchanging veracities,"[26] by the use of external description, but she prefers profounder analysis and more minute art. For Henry James, reviewing Our Mutual Friend in The Nation (21 December 1865, Collins p.473), Dickens lacks "philosophy" in his fiction, and the creation of Boffin and Pickwick, James says, is

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[25] First published 1898.

[26] See below, p. 101.

"not serious writing." James does not mean that merely because Dickens makes readers laugh he is not serious, but he finds that the comic characters lack depth and betray little knowledge of humanity. Earlier, Bagehot, in the National Review (October 1858, reprint[27] p.218), sees Dickens as primarily a comic writer, but says "It is not the function of really artistic productions to contribute to the mirth of human beings." Again, the comedy is important in that it is prevalent in Dickens, but it is not important when it comes to judging Dickens as an artist. Another reviewer, in the same periodical (July 1861, p.135), says that "no writer likes to be wholly comic," and Dickens has, after his early comic efforts, ensured that he has had a "serious" side to all his books. The fear that comedy and seriousness are incompatible, made explicit here, is apparent throughout the period to be surveyed. Critics are often intent on proving either that Dickens is more than a comic novelist, or that comedy is somehow serious. In attempting to prove the latter, they often go too far and end up not talking about the comedy at all. The best critic in the whole period, so far as discussion of Dickens's comedy goes, is Chesterton (1906).

Chesterton does not apologise for the comedy or seek Dickens's excellence elsewhere. He shows (pp. 143-44) that the comic characters are superior to the solemn characters and says that Dickens could only get to the most solemn emotions if he could do so through comedy. His solemn characters are ridiculous, but "once he has laughed at a thing it is sacred for ever." Dickens looked at the world through a lens of comedy, and Chesterton, in return, looks at Dickens through his comedy. Although he discusses many of the matters that previous critics had discussed, we are scarcely for a moment allowed to forget that it is the

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[27] Literary Studies, ed R.H. Hutton (vol.2, 1879). All future references are to this.

comic Dickens Chesterton means. Near the end of his study (p.217), in a statement about Dickens's "serious genius," he says, "and by his serious genius, I need hardly say, I mean his comic genius." This sums up his basic attitude throughout, and for the first time in a major piece of criticism comedy and seriousness are deliberately stated to be compatible. Many of Chesterton's arguments and emphases may be found scattered throughout earlier criticism and in a sense he sums up what had gone before and ties it to the comic where others had done so imperfectly, but he makes it his main business to rescue the comic in Dickens from the artistic oblivion into which it had threatened to sink.

It would be wrong to say that nineteenth century critics did not recognise the importance of comedy. That they so often discussed it, and discussed it in such solemn terms, is proof of that. Many of them have some excellent things to say about it, and very few say nothing about it. Yet my concern is with the value they give to it as well as the fact that they notice it. If they accept humour, as most of them do, they may not value it highly, and they may cavil that Dickens has lesser qualities too, such as farce. Increasingly, his faults are played down and his humour emphasised. His lesser comic qualities are accepted, as are his artistic faults, for the sake of his humour. But Chesterton, prefigured here and there by others, is the first to accept the comedy in all its guises and to claim the highest stature for Dickens both as comic artist and as artist. The very insistence on humour elsewhere indicates an attempt to dignify Dickens's comedy: humour is a superior form of comedy to fun and farce. Chesterton often uses words like "fun," "farce" and "caricature" in order to stress the comic nature of Dickens's work, and he emphasises the creative, imaginative and poetic nature of the comedy. Dickens's "poetic" qualities had been stressed before, but again Chesterton is the first extensively to speak of them with reference to the comic.

It is obvious that this section has constantly strained in the direction of evaluation of Dickens's stature. In fact, the whole of this thesis ultimately moves in that direction. In considering the comedy of the novels, the critics judge it according to certain standards of what fiction ought to be like and of what comic fiction ought to be like. During his career, reviewers of the novels need to be able to tell their readers that he is worth reading, that he is a good novelist, that the novel under review is as good as his last or as good as his best. After his death, he still needs to be evaluated. What did he achieve? Where did he stand amongst other novelists? The importance of comedy for Dickens's art therefore means two things: it is an important element of his art, and it is important because it makes or helps make him a great artist. My study, in a way, ends where it begins, with the importance of comedy.

With such a wide sweep of materials, it is impossible to do justice to all of the critics. Indeed it is not even possible to include reference to them all. More time could obviously be spent on the longer studies by Forster, Gissing and Chesterton. In a way, the task has been lightened by considering only what the critics say about the comedy, but their discussions of this aspect of Dickens's art, as I have already shown, spill over into other matters and at times must be seen in the light of other matters. The four topics which are discussed below are most important especially in the first half of Dickens's career. There are some changes as time goes on, but essentially the critics at the end of the period surveyed are still taking the same approaches to the comic as those at the beginning. Interest in Dickens's comic techniques is not absent, but discussions of his comedy are dominated by the four topics I have chosen, and although it would be possible to consider other matters, these four set up the larger framework within which nineteenth-century critics operated. It would be possible, for example, to compare

the critics' work with that of modern critics and find prefigurings of modern approaches, but that is not my intention. Nor is it my aim to discover necessarily who is the first to say any particular thing about Dickens. Since I do not have access to a wider range of materials, that is impossible. Nor again, do I intend to claim novelty of ideas for the critics I discuss. Many of their ideas stem from earlier theorists - Aristotle, Plato, Goethe, Coleridge, and so on - but I shall not point out antecedents. More important here is what they say, and what they say it about, i.e. I am interested in their statements about Dickens's comedy.

The broad historical sweep is, I believe, necessary. Chesterton must be included, but since there is a great amount of preference amongst the critics for the earlier novels, the reaction to them could not be excluded. No doubt the survey should ideally have been extended to include Edmund Wilson who radically changed the course of Dickens studies, but a halt had to be called somewhere. To make such a large amount of materials manageable, I have divided them into four periods. The first, from 1836 to 1842, covers the early novels, in which Dickens makes his reputation as a comic writer. There are already signs of adverse reaction, but in general there is little objection from the critics either to the nature of the comedy or to its content. Dickens's satire and pathos, both of which later cause objections, are accepted readily, and clearly both satisfy and help create the demand for such elements in fiction. There is some unrestrained acceptance of his fun, but already critics seek more in him than a mere comic writer and begin to reconcile his comic art with their main demands of fiction.

The second period, from 1843 to 1852, contains only three novels, but in the reaction to them and to his travel books[28] and Christmas Books,

[28] American Notes, published in 1842, awkwardly spans both this and the previous period. Since a number of the reviews considered appeared in 1843, and since the work must be discussed with Martin Chuzzlewit in most cases, I include it in the second section of each chapter.

there is a notable development of adverse criticism and of defences of his work against it. The adverse criticisms are partly directed at what the reviewers consider to be artistic flaws, but they are also caused by political and social differences. Dickens's satire is therefore often criticised because the reviewers do not agree with his views, and the snobbish reaction of "educated" reviewers to popular fiction begins. The period is, however, a transitional one between the early enthusiasm and the later frequent objections. It is a period in which Dickens's fortunes may be said to fluctuate.

During the rest of Dickens's career, the voices of discontent - more and more spurred on by political and social differences - become louder. That this is so, should not be allowed to obscure the work of persuasive and intelligent favourable critics, but in general Dickens is under attack on several fronts, not the least of which is that there is increasing opposition from other literary modes and practitioners. Thackeray's influence began in the 1840s, and George Eliot offers a further major alternative in this period. Theories of Realism and the desire for a change both work against Dickens, who appears to attempt modes of fiction for which he is not suited and who offends many with his political and social satires. The tolerance of humanitarian novelists appears to be less widespread, and both mid-Victorian complacency and the feeling that reform should be done by qualified experts, work against him.

After his death, a strong reaction sets in, but it is at all times answered by a vigorous counter-reaction. However, many things work against Dickens in this period, most of which have their roots in the earlier periods but come to flower most strongly after his death. There is much greater evidence of intellect and emphasis on psychology, philosophy and reason, in the novels of this period. Moreover, there is much more conscious attention to style and technique, to the novel as an art which

might be learned by study. Dickens's art seems irrational, clumsy and outdated, and many novelists and theorists decry it. The objections of "educated" or "high brow" critics mingle with those of the practitioners of kinds of fiction that seem new and advanced. Dickens's concern for his audience, his apparently simple effects - tears and laughter, for example - his style, and his technique all seem primitive. Yet at the same time there is dissatisfaction with the "new fiction." Both St John Topp in the Melbourne Review (July 1881, p.269), and W.D. Howells, in Harpers Monthly Magazine (July 1902, p.308), mention the possibility of a Dickens revival, and Cross, in his Development of the English Novel (1899, pp.186-87) says that after the reaction towards reason and away from sentiment, there is likely to be a reversion towards sentiment, just as there was in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries against the age of reason. Some late-century critics and theorists are confident in their feelings of novelty and of superiority to an earlier period, but there is a sense of uneasiness too, to which the continued popularity of Dickens contributed. For all of the advances that seemed to have been made, there is much discontent with the pessimism and morbidity of the new fiction, and the posturings of some of its practitioners. It is heard at least as early as 1876, when Samuel Davey, in his Darwin, Carlyle and Dickens (p.152), protests against the "vanity, self-conceit, and affectation" of the "literary dandies" in "these days of ultra-refinement." And Andrew Lang, in the Fortnightly Review (December 1898, p.954) praises Dickens's "creative power" in contrast to the mere technical expertise of the moderns. There are many testimonies to Dickens's creative powers and the vividness of his work, in late-century criticisms, and part of the appeal of his novels is simply that they are enjoyable whereas the gloomy late-century works are not. Early in Dickens's career, the fact that his novels may be enjoyed is almost brushed aside by endeavours to point out that he is more than just

an amuser of the public. This passes through a stage in which it is cynically asserted that he is fit for no more than amusing the public, until a reawakening to the value of the power to amuse takes place, But vividness suggests more than just amusement, and there is a slow growth, in some quarters, of recognition of the power of Dickens's imagination. This is a gross oversimplification of the developments of seventy years of criticism, but in general it remains true that Dickens's comedy, which is one of the most easily notable elements in his work, is also the element which is most often brushed aside by critics, and it is among the last to be found valuable. That its value lies in more than its power to amuse, and in more than its ability to carry moral messages, is recognised by only a few critics in the period under survey.

COMEDY AND TRUTH

Introduction

The ideas expressed by Dickens's critics on the relationship between fiction and truth may be traced to earlier theorists, and although many of the statements quoted will look familiar to anyone well-versed in neo-classic and Romantic poetic theory, it is not my intention to link the Victorian reviewers' theoretical assumptions back to their antecedents, but merely to show how certain ideas were applied to a body of fiction, and how adequately they were found for understanding it. If the search for truth may be traced through centuries of poetic theory,[1] a more humble source, so far as the novel goes, is in the early reaction to the English novel. The novel form, because of its content and great popularity, came under strong attack from moralists in the eighteenth century[2] because it appeared to them to be a frivolous way of wasting time and expending mental effort. Largely in order to allay their objections, novels were often passed off as "histories" or as biographies of persons who really existed or as descriptions of real events, and there were usually prefatorial protestations of fidelity to fact and moral purpose.[3] These became the central canons of criticism for a long time, and although novels may not have been expected, in the nineteenth century, to be devoted to a particular moral purpose, but they were certainly not allowed to be immoral. Moral teaching through the novel will be discussed in the next chapter but for the purpose of this, it may be said that the novel was expected to describe life, and therefore it was adversely criticised when it was seen to be lacking in truthfulness to the known world.

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[1] See M.H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp (New York, 1953), especially chapters 10 and 11.

[2] See John Tinnon Taylor, Early Opposition to the English Novel (New York, 1943).

[3] ibid., p.88.

"Truth," however, is a notoriously vague term. The most common kind of truth expected is that fiction should mirror life, that it should be as much like life as possible. This kind of demand is strengthened after the 1850s by the rise of Realist and Naturalist fiction, but it is made before the middle of the century and Realism seems to be the natural development of an interest which led some critics to see Thackeray as a superior artist to Dickens. But a mirror - at least an ordinary kind of mirror - does not shape the world as an artist does, and it does not show the artist's understanding. And there is more to men than can be seen from the outside. Often, therefore, the demand for accurate mirroring is modified by a demand for accurate perception of human nature, and the demand for faithfulness to externals is relaxed if the creation is true to human nature. This allows that the novelist is a creator as well as a describer of life, but he is never allowed to stray very far from that which may be verified by experience or observation. If he creates, he must attempt to create a kind of "ideal" world which is parallel to but less imperfect than the real world. This may be recognised as an "idea" of the creator's but in it men can still recognise themselves and their own world. Thus creation and representation are reconciled. An artistically created world or personage may be heightened by obviously fictional details which do not seem to be of the real world, but in general so long as the world or character is consistent with itself, and not too far removed from the real or actual, it is excusable. Not all critics accept the concept of an ideal world, and while some of them seek as literal a copy of the real world as possible, most are willing to accept some degree of heightening of reality. The artist heightens reality, by means of his imagination or his art, in order to make reality interesting or to open the readers' eyes to the novelty of what they think they already know.

Fiction is, however, also expected to be useful in helping men to live their lives or at least to understand life. This chapter in some ways must be seen to be very close to the next. Only art that somehow corresponds to life can be of any moral, practical or philosophical benefit to readers. It is therefore often asked whether fiction is true about life as well as merely to it. The novelist makes statements, or statements are inferred from his work, and their truthfulness is discussed. This is particularly true of periodical criticism because Dickens touches upon topical matters on which most critics and the journals they write for have some political, moral or social standpoint.

Dickens's fiction at times offends critics on such extra-literary grounds, but because of the element of exaggeration in his work, he also fails to satisfy some of the demands for truth. His works do not simply correspond to reality, his characters do not seem to be true to human nature, and they are said not to be perfections of human nature but rather distortions of it. Against all of these objections, there are opposing viewpoints which I shall not consider further here because it would be to anticipate what is shown in this chapter. The comedy of the novels is not the sole offender in the eyes of those who believe that Dickens offends, but it is one of the main culprits. There is, as some critics realise, no reason why comic fiction should not satisfy the demand for truth, but often Dickens's does not, and it therefore causes opposition from his adverse critics and embarrassment among his supporters. His comic art is defended in what may be called traditional ways - ways which have been sketchily described above. This means that, often, the comic is justified insofar as it approximates to standards applied to the non-comic. While this is not necessarily dangerous, preference for truthful fiction leads critics to reject some aspects of the comic which most clearly offend - farce, for example - and the bias towards reality and verification by experience is often stronger than the appreciation of

the comic. In essence, critics carry out a process of dignifying the comic in accordance with their preconceived notions about the requirements to be made of fiction.

The Early Reaction : 1836 - 1842.

Reviewing Pickwick Papers, the Athenaeum (3 December 1836, Collins p.32) says that "a wit or humorist should remind you of human nature - human nature in its vivid and lustrous colours," and this statement shows, very early in Dickens's career, an acceptance of some degree of heightening of the real. Yet there must be, at bottom, truth to human nature or to life in general, and the English novel is characterised by T.H. Lister in the Edinburgh Review (October 1838, p.97) as "that rich and useful department of fiction which is founded on faithful representations of human character, as exemplified in the aspects of English life." That fiction should faithfully represent man and his environment is an opinion held by most reviewers throughout the period under survey, but awareness of Dickens's comedy presents problems for many of them. The potential clash between faithful representation and comic representation of the world is not always avoided in his novels, and it is a source of anxiety to some critics who, however much they are attracted to the comic in the novels, feel that they should nevertheless judge them according to the critical canon of truth. Those who do not simply decide that the attraction of truthfulness is stronger than the amusement that comedy affords, usually end up making some kind of special plea on behalf of the comic.

A simple approach to the truthfulness of Dickens's comedy may be seen in the American Southern Literary Messenger, where Judge Beverley Tucker attacks first Oliver Twist and The Public Life of Mr. Tulrumble (May 1837) and then Pickwick Papers (September 1837). In the first article, Tucker refuses to give extracts from the works because they

would be "at once extravagant and dull, preposterous, yet not ludicrous." These words point towards the charge of exaggeration which is made most strongly in the second article, where Tucker mentions (p.526) a critic[4] who had defended Dickens's exaggeration, and he says (p.531) that

> we are not of the number of those who believe that "effect can be heightened by exaggeration," or that any picture is the better for "being overcharged." He who shoots above the mark may miss it as far as he who falls below. The skill rem acu tangere is what we require from him who claims pre-eminence as a painter. This skill we must deny to Mr. Dickens, and we maintain that the great body of his work is made up of grimace and absurd caricature, and impossible incidents happening to beings that have no existence in nature.

In assuming that Dickens does "claim pre-eminence as a painter," Tucker manages to miss the point of much of the comedy. He sees, for example, no reason why Tony Weller, who is, he says (p.530), "quite sagacious," should be made to "act the part of an idiot," nor why Mr. Pickwick, who is "no madman," is made to play the fool" whenever it suits the coarse humor of the author (p.528)." There is, he says (p.528), no exhibition of character in the novel, but only of the "extremes of unimaginable knavery and folly, illustrated by impossible incidents.[5]" Clearly, Tucker expects English fiction to contain accurate descriptions of England and its people, for one of the few characters he praises is Mr. Wardle. He hopes that there are such people in England, so that there is "a place in the Island where a Virginia gentleman would feel that he was at home and in the midst of his kindred." Thus it appears that Tucker is unable to distinguish between the exaggerated bonhomie of Wardle and the comic exaggeration of Pickwick, yet he accepts one character and not the other.

Part of his problem is that he appears to be ignorant of English life, and perhaps the same trans-Atlantic ignorance leads "J.S.D.," in

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[4] He is not named, nor is the newspaper in which the criticism appeared.

[5] The emphasis here is the reviewer's.

the Christian Examiner (November 1839, p.172), to see the Pickwickians and their adventures as a satire on modern society. The comic characters are said to be "nothings in themselves, made altogether by society, whose life consists in appearing, and whose tragic sufferings spring from their failure to do this well." The reviewer's failure to define his terms here leads to a kind of chain reaction: comedy which is a mixture of farce, humour, word-play, and perhaps a little satire, becomes, in the reviewer's eyes, not only predominantly satire, but even tragedy. However, the New York Star (1838[6]) says that "some inconsiderate critics" have objected that Sam Weller is unnatural. It is usually untravelled American writers who have said such a thing, the reviewer says, and, going by Bulwer's Pelham and Paul Clifford and by the police reports in London newspapers, the language is, he says, not exaggerated. These three American critics, in their search for truth in Dickens's fiction, illustrate some of the possible results of the quest. The Southern Literary Messenger finds no truth to human nature in the comic characters, while the New York Star believes that there is truth in some of them, and the Christian Examiner thinks that the comedy offers truths about modern society. But in all three cases, the comedy is, to a large extent, ignored.

English reviewers stress the truthfulness of the early works to English life and society, too. In the Examiner (2 July 1837, Collins p.37), Forster says of the Fleet scenes in Pickwick Papers, "All of it is real life and human nature. It is not a collection of humorous and pathetic dialogues about people who have no tangible existence in the mind; but it is a succession of actual scenes." This suggests a compromise between the creative art of the novelist and the real-life materials he

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6 repr. Dickensian (August 1908, pp.219-20). No more exact date is given.

works with, but the emphasis is nevertheless strongly on the realistic basis of the art. The tendency to praise art that creates an impression of reality is even more clearly apparent in the Examiner's review[7] (27 October 1839, p.678) of Nicholas Nickleby, where it is stated that the "creative powers of the novelist, when properly directed and well sustained, take rank with history itself," and if Dickens carries on in the same vein he may eventually emulate Burke and Gibbon. The Spectator (24 November 1838, Collins p.43), praising the characters in Oliver Twist, says that "The Londoners of Boz, are flesh and blood - living creatures," and the Literary Gazette of the same date (Collins p.79) praises Dickens for "the raising up and embodying of a number of original human beings ... endowed with such living feelings and passions, and acting in so real and natural a manner, that . . . we no more doubt of their existence than if we had seen them in the flesh, conversed with them, and observed their conduct." This statement is about Dickens's characters in general, but the examples the reviewer gives - Pickwick, Weller, Squeers, Ralph Nickleby, Smike and Newman Noggs - are, with two exceptions, comic characters.

On the other hand, the Atlas (3 February 1836, p.123) objects to Boz's vulgar caricature, and Abraham Hayward, in the Quarterly Review (October 1837, p.495), says that the two Wellers talk a language and employ allusions "utterly irreconcilable with their habits and station." Fault-finding may, at times, become rather trivial, as when a writer in the Literary and Pictorial Repository (July 1838[8]) complains about the "rheumatic sparrow" (in the tree at the back of Arthur Gride's house).

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[7] According to Brice, "Reviewers of Dickens in the Examiner," Dickens Studies Newsletter (September 1972, pp.68-80), possibly by Leigh Hunt, but I shall henceforth leave it unattributed.

[8] Quoted in "The Offending Razor," L.B. Cholmondeley, Dickensian (Autumn 1939, pp.269-71.) The reviewer of Nicholas Nickleby mainly complains of the seemingly incomprehensible order from Squeers that every boy admitted to his school should bring a razor with him.

He says, "there is not the least spark of truth in such a description, and the author has no right, for the sake of the laughter of the vulgar, to invest an object with any peculiarity diametrically opposed to its real nature." When Dickens seems to sacrifice truth to gain laughter he is likely to be condemned in this way. A less uncompromising statement on this question is made by the Metropolitan Magazine (May 1836, p.15) which, reviewing Number One of Pickwick Papers, warns Boz against extravagance, but says that even this may be excused in him because he makes it "so laugh-provoking." However, the same journal (August 1836, p.110) is much happier with the fourth Number because the humour is now "not that of extravagance but of nature." Dickens's move towards even greater seriousness, in the Fleet scenes, is hailed with high praise by Forster, in the Examiner (2 July 1837, Collins p.37). He says, "We can now rarely find anything that approaches to caricature or exaggeration without finding also some very shrewd truth concealed beneath it." The attitude towards Dickens's exaggeration is indulgent because improvements are both expected and found, but sterner voices than Forster's are heard, and if a degree of heightening, whether comic or not, is accepted, it is the underlying truth that matters most. Forster also says that there is now in Dickens's work "a superior insight into the general principles of character joining itself to the old and exquisite representations of local peculiarities and humours." The word "humour" in this sense does not, of course, refer merely to the comic, and Forster in this passage is not praising Dickens simply as a comic writer, but it is already clear that Dickens is going to have to face up to a demand for depth of characterisation, and whether he can satisfy it as a comic writer is not yet certain.

The danger of comedy is that, in laughing at it, readers may miss the truths contained in it. Lewes, in the National Magazine and Monthly Critic (December 1837, Collins p.65), feels that it is necessary to say that the early novels are "volumes of human nature, that have a deep and

subtle philosophy in them, which those who read only to laugh may not discover." The need may be quasi-philosophical as it is here, and it may be political, as it is in the New Moral World (18 July 1840, p.34), where the reviewer says that "beneath his highly humorous descriptions, we discover the most important truths so clearly developed . . . And they are truths[9] (which) . . . advance the cause of Socialism." But the kind of comedy Dickens offers may be seen to be simply true to life. The Christian Examiner (March 1842, pp.17-18), for example, feels that the abundance of tears and smiles in Dickens's works gives a true picture of life, because "in the most trivial incidents or in the gayest scenes there is always an under current of the plaintive and the sad."

But much of this stressing of the solemn, the profound, the philosophical and the merely true to life in Dickens's comedy is more a matter of the reviewers' final emphasis in many cases. Summarising their opinions of a novel, they seem to feel bound to say that there are deeper things in Dickens than mere comedy. To say otherwise might be to encourage a frivolous attitude to fiction. But there are a number of comments about truthfulness in fiction which hint at a more understanding approach to Dickens's comedy. For example, the Spectator (31 March 1838, p.304) says that Dickens's art "imparts vitality to the literal," and that his "literalness" has been redeemed from the "meanness and dryness of the inventorial style" by his "touches of pathos," his "penetrating reflections," and his "points of universal truth." This is not a reference specifically to the comedy of the novels, but in appreciating art that is not merely "literal," it opens the possibility of a more complex approach to the comic. This may be seen in the Examiner's

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[9]Here truth is clearly almost synonymous with effect. Such "truths" are, in fact, "lessons." See below, p.130.

comment (27 October 1839, Collins p.48) that Dickens "individualises what he takes in hand." He both observes and invents, and thus Nicholas Nickleby shows readers many things which they are already acquainted with, and can recognise, and it also shows them "passages of nature and life of which they before knew nothing, but of the truth of which their own habits and senses suffice to assure them." There are many comments such as that of the Morning Post (12 March 1836, p.6) which praises Sketches by Boz for "giving importance to the common-place scenes of every day occurrence," or the assertion in Chambers's Edinburgh Journal (9 April 1836, p.83) that Dickens "has much comic power, and perceives traits which are not consciously noted by ordinary observers, and yet, when mentioned, remind every body of the thing described." Verisimilitude is the basic canon of art against which Dickens is at times seen to fail, but the vividness and the heightening powers of his art are praised, and so long as he does not stray too far from the truth and does not abuse his readers' knowledge and experience of the world, his artistic licence is felt to be allowable. But just how far he was to be allowed to go, and when he was seen to succeed and when to fail, remained questions upon which there were wide varieties of opinion.

Even in the conservative Edinburgh Review (October 1838), there is an allowance for Dickens's artistic heightening of truth. T.H. Lister finds much to praise in the early novels, and he says (p.76) that Dickens is adept at rendering the follies of human nature "more apparent by humorous exaggeration." Later (p.85), he adds that Dickens's characters are "not complete and finished delineations, but rather outlines, very clearly and sharply traced, which the reader may fill up for himself; and they are calculated not so much to represent the actual truth as to suggest it." Some of them are "not sufficiently true to nature," but the better ones are, although they may not be slavish imitations. The legal figures in Pickwick Papers, for example, are "touched, though

slightly, yet all with spirit, and a strong appearance of truth." The word I emphasise suggests how accommodating Lister's argument is to this stage, but a little later (p.86) Oliver Twist is said to be superior to Pickwick Papers because there is less of "that tone of humorous exaggeration which, however amusing,sometimes detracts from the truthfulness" of the earlier novel. The review ends with the hope that Dickens will "check all disposition to exaggerate" and continue to practise "faithful representation of human character." The emphasis is thus replaced on truthfulness, but Lister's earlier arguments offer some liberty to the comic artist. He does, near the end of his article (p.96), compliment Dickens, saying "There is such perfect truthfulness in the generality of his characters, that deviations from nature are less intolerable than when found in other works," and this again seems to open the loophole for Dickens's comic and artistic heightening. Lister does not want to be too restrictive of his author, but it is clear that although he allows Dickens some liberty he is willing to take it away again once "extravagance" seems to rear its head.

Lister touches on the early satires and finds little to complain of, but when Dickens offends a reviewer's social or political viewpoint, the truthfulness of his art and the freedom to deal freely with fact are both likely to be denied him. Richard Ford, in the Quarterly Review (June 1839, p.90), for example, begins by praising Dickens's "artistic skill" and says that he "translates nature and life." Here he does not refer specifically to the comic in Dickens, but he suggests that the method is allowable. Boz is allowed to set things in a "strong light." For artistic or moral purpose, things may be given more prominence than they might have in reality. Yet, Dickens offends Ford's politics in his treatment of the workings of the Poor Law, in Oliver Twist, and Ford sharply says (p.94), "The abuses which he ridicules are not only exaggerated, but in nineteen cases out of twenty do not at all exist."

What exists in life is determinable by the reviewer's experience, and what he says about fiction may be influenced by his motive. The truthfulness of Dickens's fiction is therefore often a source of contradictory conclusions among the critics when it touches on sensitive matters such as politics. To take a trivial example, both the Examiner (27 October 1839, Collins p.50) and the Literary Gazette (7 April 1838, p.214) find the early passages of Nicholas Nickleby involving the "Muffin and Crumpet Joint-stock Company" - as the Examiner abbreviates it - to be exaggerated, but the Athenaeum (31 March 1838, p.227) claims that the "ridiculous speculations at this time actually carried on through the attornies and newspapers, defy invention to surpass them." A more important difference of opinion, in view of the later controversy over the justice of Dickens's legal satire, may be seen in the comments of two reviewers of Pickwick Papers. In the Quarterly Review (October 1837, p.509), Abraham Hayward, a barrister, says that Dickens is "by no means happy" in delineating the "profession of the law and its dependants."[10] Buzfuz is, we are told, nothing like the original he is supposed to portray, and of the other legal gentlemen in the novel, only Stareleigh is an accurate portrayal. However, in the rationalist London and Westminster Review (July 1837, Collins p.54), Charles Buller[11] writes that the Bardell v. Pickwick trial is a " strikingly ludicrous" but not exaggerated view of the "absurd and odious effects of the English law of evidence," and that Nupkins, who seems to be a caricature, is in fact only a "slight exaggeration of the follies and injustice of the Great Unpaid." The justification of the fiction, in these cases, most clearly depends on the experience in life and the motives of the reviewers. The

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[10] This is linked to the arguments which see Dickens as being limited by his ignorance. See below, pp.204-5.

[11] Collins, op.cit., p.52, says Buller was a pupil of Carlyle's and one of the parliamentary radicals.

appeal to experience is hard to refute, but it is not necessarily trustworthy and it tells us very little about the fiction. Lewes, for example, in the National Magazine and Monthly Critic (December 1837, Collins p.66), asserts that Jingle is true to life because he once knew someone who talked in Jingle's manner. Art is defended by the critic's experience of life, which may be a most dangerous practice.

Lewes's review is, however, the source of a more intelligent defence of Dickens's methods than such a statement may seem to indicate. He says that the characters have their individualities but they are nevertheless faithful to nature and represent classes of mankind. In this, they are just like ordinary human beings, who are representatives of general humanity yet retain their own individual characters. Lewes admits (Collins p.66) that the Fat Boy is a caricature, but he defends the creation firstly because it gives variety and drollery to the novel, and secondly because the Fat Boy is at least a consistent character. This raises Dickens's characterisation above the level of mere caricature, which can only create inconsistent characters and extravagances. The Fat Boy is quite obviously not true to nature, but he is acceptable because he is true to himself. This opens up a possibility, which Lewes does not discuss further, that art need not be wholly true to nature; but there is a difference between accepting an occasional comic caricature and accepting that art itself need not be closely restricted to what is natural, and none of the critics in the period under survey allows Dickens any wide-sweeping freedom in this respect. If they adopt arguments that allow him freedom, they attempt ultimately to tie his art to the real.

The idea of consistency is fairly widespread in the early period.[12]

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[12] See also Hazlitt, Lectures on the English Comic Writers (1818 ; 1930 p.11).

A common term for it is "keeping." The Monthly Review (March 1836, p.350) dislikes the "gloomy" scenes of Sketches by Boz because they lack "the most advantageous subordination or keeping[13] in the parts," and the Eclectic Review (April 1837, p.343) finds in Mr. Pickwick "a very grievous want of keeping and consistency," while Hayward says in the Quarterly Review (October 1837, p.485) that Dickens cannot hope to compare with the "exquisite delicacy, fine finish, and perfect keeping of Steele's and Addison's pet characters." Dickens's consistency of characterisation seems to be rather heavily under attack, and Fraser's Magazine (April 1840, Collins pp.87-88) adds its voice to the detractors. The minor characters of Dickens's novels (the reviewer instances Dr. Slammer of the 79th,) are consistent, but when a major character has to be supported through several scenes and chapters, the reviewer believes, Dickens's sustaining powers wilt and inconsistencies appear. Caricatures like Dr. Slammer are easy to sustain, but in Mr. Pickwick, Dickens is seen to fail; and indeed all of the Pickwickians show inconsistency, according to the reviewer. He says,"All this, certainly, is not, as the painters say, in keeping." The idea is picked up by Poe in two articles, in the Philadelphia Saturday Evening Post (1 May 1841[14]) and in Graham's American Monthly Magazine (May 1841). The first of these is a review of Barnaby Rudge, in which Poe says that Miss Miggs and Sim Tappertit are not caricatures because in them there is a "well-sustained exaggeration of all their traits, which has the effect of keeping." The idea is repeated in the review of The Old Curiosity Shop in Graham's Magazine (p.251), where Poe reiterates that caricature does not exist where "the component parts are in keeping." Unlike his earlier English counterparts, Poe takes up a position similar to that of Lewes in the National

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[13]The emphasis is the reviewer's.

[14]repr., Dickensian (July 1913, pp.174-78).

Magazine (December 1837)and finds that, on the whole, Dickens's characterisation is consistent. His argument spills over into a discussion of Dickens's "idealism," to which I shall return later.

Another argument which explains the use of what appear to be caricatures is to say that the characters are true to life, but true to the unusual or the extraordinary. Lewes says that he knew a man who talked like Jingle, and statements made by other reviewers either show an interest in odd characters or state that such oddities might be found existing if readers know where to seek them. The Morning Post (12 March 1836, p.6), in its notice of the Sketches, says, for example, that provincial readers may find in the work insights into "the manners and customs of some extraordinary classes of people in the British capital." Boz, that is, is truthful, but not necessarily to the common run of humanity. Similarly, in the London and Westminster Review (July 1837, Collins p.52), Buller says that Dickens employs his powers of humour and wit in "describing and commenting on the comic peculiarities of the lower orders of Englishmen." Boz's dual achievement is "exactness and comic effect," and Buller adds (Collins p.53) that, compared to Theodore Hook, Dickens is remarkable for his "simplicity and truth to nature." Chambers's Edinburgh Journal (29 April 1837[15]) praises Dickens for chronicling the lives of "the most odd-looking and odd-speaking beings" who inhabit London but who have, since the time of Smollett, largely been left to "vegetate unheeded." Similar statements that Dickens's characters are true to the oddities of real life may be found in a number of early reviews.[16] Thomas Hood, reviewing The Old Curiosity Shop in the Athenaeum (7 November 1840, Collins p.98), says that Quilp is a "Little Enormity," but adds -" Whether such beings exist in real life, may appear,

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15 repr., Miller and Strange, A Centenary Bibliography of The Pickwick Papers, (1936, pp.85-86).

16 See Bells Life in London (3 July and 10 April 1836), Sunday Herald (21 February 1836) and News and Sunday Herald (10 April 1836)

at first sight, somewhat questionable; but in fairness, before deciding in the negative, one ought to go and view the 'wilderness' assigned as his haunt; and then ask whether there may not be for such scenery fit actors and appropriate dramas? . . . although remote from our personal experience, there may be such persons as Quilp about the purlieus and back slums of human nature." The appeal to experience could ideally send the reader on a tour of London's by-ways with the novel as guide-book, but Hood's interest is only partly "topographical," as he calls it, and his argument slides from the "back slums" of London to those of "human nature." Readers are asked perhaps to search parts of London, but in the end Hood merely advises them to study the oddities in human nature. The appeal is ultimately to experience and to the reader's knowledge of human nature, but it is not as simple an appeal as Hood at first makes it look.

But the truthfulness of Dickens's comic characterisation is suspected, and even though it may be difficult to find Quilps in the world, they may be there. As a comic artist and creator of sheer nonsense in some of his poems, it is not surprising to find Hood allowing a lot of freedom to Dickens in this respect. Different again, however, is his comment on Dick Swiveller who, he says (Collins p.97), is the "representative of a very numerous class - plenty as weeds," and whose "shifts and shabbinesses are similar to those of a whole class of persons in London. If such people exist, the truth of the characterisation may be verified by observation, although such people do not necessarily exist in life in the form that they do in fiction. Hood's idea is expressed elsewhere. For example, the Spectator (16 April 1836, p.373) briefly notices "The Tuggses at Ramsgate," published in The Library of Fiction, and the reviewer says, "Boz's characters represent classes of people formed by circumstances: they are individual only in costume." But such a statement harks back to the idea, examined above, that there

are, mingled in Dickens's work, both the real and the fanciful, the observed and the invented. "Truth" is heightened. The Court Magazine (April 1837, Collins p.34) expresses this nicely. It says, "The vraisemblable is not 'Boz's' line of art; the vrai is with him all in all. What he gives you is literally true, but like a consummate artist, he does not give it to you literally. It is not enough that a portrait should be a good likeness, it must bear a certain air and grace beyond the likeness to constitute excellence - and in this 'Boz' is perfect." There is, in all that Dickens does, a "felicity that is inseparable from truth[17]," but the presence of the artist is visibly, yet tactfully, evident. The reviewer accepts his presence and does not see it as destroying the illusion of reality. The comment is not specifically about the comedy, but the examples given refer mainly to comic characters, and the argument itself opens up the possibility of a more flexible approach.

Poe, in his Graham's Magazine article (May 1841 , p.251) strikes a similar note when he says that a certain amount of exaggeration is "essential to the proper depicting of truth itself." Not only does Dickens exaggerate, the suggestion is that all artists, comic and non-comic, exaggerate. Of course, "exaggeration" here does not mean what it means in others' criticisms, but has the sense of "heightening." Unnecessary exaggeration leads to a loss of "keeping" and consequently to caricature, but Poe believes Dickens avoids this. The laugh caused by his characters is different from that caused by caricature because it is the result of "properly artistical incongruity[18] - the source of all mirth." Like Lister,[19] Poe is willing to allow enough exaggeration for the effect of heightening, but no more than is necessary. The best

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[17] Quoted by J.W.T. Ley, "The National Dickens Library," Dickensian (May 1908, p.118) as "unimpeachable for truth."

[18] The emphases in quotations from Poe are his own.

[19] See above, pp.46-47.

characters are not caricatures but "creations" which belong to "the most august regions of the Ideal." The importance of Poe's use of the words "creation" and "ideal" needs to be stressed. He says, a little earlier (p.250), that "the Art of Mr. Dickens, although elaborate and great, seems only a happy modification of Nature," but he praises Dickens's originality and calls him a creative artist. For Poe, as for many others, the creative artist creates - in a sense recreates - reality in a form that is true to nature[20] yet shows the unmistakeable presence of art.[20] The best characters - Poe instances "Nelly, the grandfather, the Sexton, and the man of the furnace, are noble characters who belong to the "most august regions of the Ideal," and it appears that the comic characters are not automatically included in this praise because the materials used to create them are "not all of the highest." Later, still praising Dickens's idealism and his "chaste, vigorous, and glorious imagination," Poe mentions "the haunts of Quilp among the wharf-rats" and "the tinkering of the Punch-men among the tombs," which is as near as he gets to including the comic characters among the "ideal" elements of the work. Thus it may be seen that Poe begins with a defence of the comic in Dickens but when he goes on to claim high poetic powers for his author, he leaves the comic behind and prefers the highly emotional content of the novel and scenes of symbolic significance.

The comic characters - and some non-comic characters too, no doubt, but Poe does not specify - are not considered fit for the august regions of the Ideal. Without special reference to comedy, the Christian Examiner (November 1839, p.168) feels that Dickens's characters "tell more of his true perceptions of the actual, the local, the conventional," than of his "aspirations to the Ideal." Even if it is a compliment to Dickens that he is true to life, this comment suggests that he may be felt to be

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[20] I dispense with Poe's capitals.

limited if he does not seem to rise above the ordinary levels of life. Homely and uninspiring characters, as well as eccentric and unusual types are equally felt to be of a lesser order of creation than those in which the real is clearly seen to be heightened but not falsified. Eccentric characters are not typical of the world, and although there is felt to be some merit in accurate portrayal of common people, it is felt that the highest fiction treats of the highest natures. This feeling increases during Dickens's career and in the generation after his death, and at times leads to a confusion of literary with social class. Low social types amongst the characters are felt to ensure low comedy, and those who seek intellectual satisfaction become more and more dissatisfied with Dickens's work. In this early period, however, sympathy for the poor, whose portrayal in fiction is yet a novelty, is acceptable to most critics.

Exaggeration of any kind is felt by most critics to be either unacceptable, or if acceptable, to be so only to a limited degree. The Monthly Review (March 1836), reviewing the first series of Sketches by Boz, objects to the occasional tendency towards exaggeration, and in its review of the second series the Monthly (February 1837, p.153), beginning with a discussion of the same subject, says that "it now occurs to us that this sort of colouring should be characterised as a feature belonging to a certain order of wit or humour." In the first of these two reviews, the reviewer accepts (p.350) "strong relief" in sketches of real life because this may "make up for the want of a number of nameless touches, movements and influences, which the actual objects and scenes sought to be represented, necessarily possess and are surrounded by." The writer of sketches, that is, must select details, and use his "judgment, fancy, and taste" to colour an otherwise drab reality. Ironically, the novelist, who does not merely describe actual scenes, is expected to be more truthful to life as it is. As far as the comic novelist is

concerned, a degree of heightening is accepted, and at least the reviewer recognises that comic exaggeration should not be condemned out of hand; but he does not value it very highly. The London University Magazine (I, 1842, p.393), too, feels that Dickens "does not sufficiently restrain his tendency to caricature," and the reviewer does not think that Dickens has achieved the degree of truthfulness found in Goldsmith, but he does admit (p.391) that Dickens "is eminently successful in catching the habits of thought or expression belonging to particular classes of men, or callings; while his keen sense of the comic enables him to give a highly humorous, and generally not too palpable exaggeration of them." This reviewer, according to his distinction between wit and humour,[21] accepts a degree of caricature in the humorist's work, but Dickens is not to overdo it. Some reviewers already claim high excellence for his work, but because anything that has caricature or any kind of exaggeration in it is disqualified from such a level, his comedy is already under suspicion in the more demanding reviews. Often it is the underlying truth that is most important, and although there are some accommodating arguments, there are also signs of opposition. The seeds of both the defences of and the attacks on Dickens's "truthfulness" have been sown.

The Middle Years : 1843 - 1852

This section includes only three novels, but the reaction to them is interesting because it is at times similar to the enthusiasm which greeted the earlier works and at times more akin to the loud protests about the later novels. Since this study is concerned mainly with the novels, I shall do no more than touch upon the minor works of Dickens, but it must be said that in this middle period of his career, it is the minor works which do much to arouse the adversely critical tendencies of the reviewers.

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[21] Quoted above, p.12.

The first work to arouse widespread opposition is American Notes, and since much of the adverse reaction is based either on a dislike for Dickens's politics or on disappointment that he has not written a different kind of book, I shall not go into it here. However, a refrain which runs through a number of reviews - in Blackwood's Magazine (December 1842), the Southern Literary Messenger (January 1843), the Quarterly Review (March 1843) and the London University Magazine (I, 1842) - is that Dickens has failed to enhance or sustain his reputation as an accurate observer of men and places.[22] Dickens was disappointed by the reviewers' reactions and, according to Forster (Life I, p.285), sent Martin Chuzzlewit to America to "make good his Notes." If the success of this intention could be measured by the vigour of critical reaction, then it was certainly successful, and the truthfulness of the representation of America is as hotly debated in reviews of the novel as it was among reviewers of the preceding book of travels.

American reviewers were naturally angry with Dickens over his "pretended pictures of morals and manners in the United States," as the Knickerbocker (September 1844, p.274) calls them. The reviewer continues to say "They are for the most part caricatures, so gross as to be incapable of exciting any emotion save one in the mind of any American reader," but he is, compared to some other American writers, fairly restrained in his criticism, and he admits the truth of two of Dickens's observations.[23] Some journals mount energetic attacks on Dickens, and even those who retain some respect and liking for him feel that he

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[22] See Ada C. Nisbet, "The Mystery of Martin Chuzzlewit." Essays Critical and Historical Dedicated to Lily B. Campbell. 1950; rpt. New York 1968, pp.208 ff.

[23] That Americans, in their speech, emphasize the smaller words and syllables and leave the more important units of sound and sense to themselves; and that they have a curious sense of Liberty - as Mark Tapley says, they are so fond of Liberty they keep taking liberties with her.

is in temporary decline. Brother Jonathan (29 July 1843[24]), for example, noting that Dickens has landed Martin in America, wonders "whose turn to be abused and belied will come now," but feels that there is "good fun" in Dickens yet and that once he gets in a better mood his work will improve.

Despite their typical tendency towards seeking faithful representation of men and manners in novels, reviewers may be excused for expecting accurate pictures of America in Martin Chuzzlewit, since it follows so closely on Dickens's visit there and his book of travels. Nevertheless there is some irony in the fact that British reviewers who have not been to America find fault with Dickens's work, just as earlier Americans who had not been to Britain criticised Pickwick Papers for its lack of truthfulness or praised it for its fidelity to London life.[25] In the case of Martin Chuzzlewit, national antipathies are involved, and some English journals, like the Monthly Review (September 1844, p.146), are delighted to be able to have the laugh of the Americans. More soberly, the Westminster Review (December 1843, p.458) finds it "unaccountable" that in so vast a land Dickens should find "all barren of goodness." That there should be "slanderers and swindlers" in so large a country is not surprising, but to concentrate the readers's attention on such people alone is to give a false impression. Any artistic purpose that Dickens may have is ignored, and the feeling seems to be that if he could not state the whole truth about America, Dickens should have left the subject alone.

Thomas Cleghorn, in the North British Review (May 1845, p.74), has no quarrel, however, with Dickens's intention which he describes as that of tracing "the influence of selfishness in disfiguring a national character."

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[24] repr. Dickensian (April 1914, pp.97-99). Comments quoted are on p.97.

[25] See above, pp. 41-42.

He feels that the "well known faults of social life in the United States" are satirised powerfully, but says that the American scenes fail because the satire is so bitter and coarse, and because Dickens neither achieves his intention nor integrates the scenes with the rest of the novel. Artistic excellence does not rely on verisimilitude and truth-telling alone, but if the art serves a useful purpose, its deficiencies as art may be ignored or played down. The American satire is disliked because it is felt to be ineffective and bitter, but Pecksniff, though "undoubtedly a caricature" and neither "probable" nor "consistent," is half-accepted because he serves a useful moral purpose and is highly amusing. However, Cleghorn says, Dickens has spoiled his hand of late by drawing too many grotesque Quilps, Dennises and Tappertits. Mrs. Gamp is a production similar to these, and despite the conviction that "her dialect is doubtless copied very faithfully from nature, "Cleghorn dismisses her because he finds her revolting. But his amusement at both Pecksniff and Mrs.Gamp almost gets the better of his moral repugnance, and he pays tribute, with some embarrassment, to the comedy of Mrs. Gamp by saying (p.73) that "she seems to be such a favourite of the author that . . . we are almost provoked to laugh in spite of our disgust." Clearly, his taste is too squeamish to accept what he sees as a mixture of unpleasant reality and grotesque exaggeration that goes to make up characters like Mrs. Gamp, Quilp and Sim Tappertit, and although the desire for truthfulness is still much in evidence, it is modified by Cleghorn's concerns for effect and morality.[26]

The Examiner (26 October 1844, p.675) has, in Forster, a reviewer whose stomach is not so squeamish, and he praises the satire of Martin Chuzzlewit for striking at "the core of the vices of the time." The wrath of the Americans is noted, but Pecksniff is said to be more loath-

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[26] See below, p.143.

some than anything in the American part of the work. America has nothing as evil as Pecksniff in its society, and if Americans would stop abusing Dickens they might profit by him and never attain to Pecksniff's "full-blown vice," an evil that is deeply English and "a swamp less easy to be drained" than the swamp of Eden. In this way, Forster attempts to divert critical attention from personal attacks on the author to the morality of the novel. But he runs the risk of offending his English readers, and hastily adds, "The confession is not encouraging to national pride, but we must plainly aver this character to be emphatically English. We do not mean that Englishmen are Pecksniffs, but that the ruling weakness is to countenance and encourage the race." People allow themselves to be deceived in life by such a character, but when they meet with it in a fiction they call it an exaggeration, Forster argues. Pecksniff is invented, he says, to "subserve the purposes of the deepest and most genial truth." Genial the truth may be, but apart from this admission to the comedy of the fiction, the emphasis is clearly on the sober seriousness of the moral lesson,[27] based on its truthfulness. But Forster does not merely seek truthful representation of reality, and is willing to accept the comic art that surrounds the reality lying beneath. He says, of the novel generally, "It seems to us that with no abatement of the power which gives out sharp and bold impressions of reality, we have more of the subtler requisites which satisfy imagination and reflection." The possibility of more profound reading of the comedy is present, but there is still a need to dignify comedy by reference to its morality and truthfulness.

Already it may be seen, from the reaction to Martin Chuzzlewit, that the question of truth continues to figure strongly in discussions of the comedy of Dickens's work. That there is a heavy tinting of

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[27] See below, p. 141.

morality in the debate is not surprising since, as Cleghorn's comments show, offensive truths are still seen to be out of place in fiction. The standard of "truth" is flexible, even if within fairly tight limits, and fiction that is less truthful but morally more elevated than that which indicates greater veracity or verisimilitude, may be placed higher because of its moral effect. This may be seen in two reviews of David Copperfield, in The Times (11 June 1851, p.8) and The Monitor (1 February 1851, p.29), in which Thackeray is found to be the more truthful writer, but Dickens is preferred because of his higher morality.[28]

The strongest and most valuable vein of criticism in this period, as in the last, involves the tendency to find in comedy some kind of heightening of the real. R.H. Horne (1844, p.29), putting forward the idea of the characters as types, in answer to the charge of caricature, stresses their underlying reality. Already he is uncomfortably aware that the term "caricature" has often been applied to them, and at one point (p.25) argues that those who call them this have been misled by the illustrations, which are caricatures. Dickens's characters, however, are, in his opinion, creations which have the roundness of reality combined with generalisation about human nature. The characters are "not mere realities, but the type and essence of real classes; while the personal and graphic touches render them at the same time individualized." When Dickens does create "mere realities" such as Mrs. Maylie or Mr. Brownlow, they walk about in the novels with "a very respectable and uncomfortable air," Horne says. This is not praise specifically for comic heightening, because Horne includes Oliver Twist among the praise-worthy characters, but most of the examples he gives (p.26), in a long

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[28] See below, p. 139 for similar arguments on this point.

list, are comic characters. Earlier (p.6), he seems to want to prove that Quilp may be true to life, because he says that it is possible that the student of character may, once in his life, observe such a person, and he says that "that were quite familiar proof enough for nature and art." And in fact, Dickens's wide range of different characters including such as Quilp, proves that he knows life well. Recluses and those who paint purely from imagination, he says, draw only monstrosities or ideal types. The ordinariness of most of the characters, the extraordinariness of a few of them and the sheer fecundity with which they are produced adds to the impression that Dickens has seen a good deal of life.

Dickens's adverse critics, however, might say that his characters show no depth of insight. Dickens sees many things on the surface, but not deeply. But the American critic, E.P. Whipple, no admirer of the superficial, is satisfied to an extent by Dickens's characterization. In the North American Review (October 1849, Collins pp. 239-40), he says that Dickens gives the impression of observing, not creating, the creatures of his brain. Squeers, Pecksniff, Sim Tappertit, Mark Tapley, Tony Weller and "old Joe Willet,"[29] may be felt to be a little overcharged, but Whipple says they are caricatured "more in appearance than in reality, and if grotesque in form, are true and natural at heart." A basis of reality is necessary, but complete truth to life is not. Whipple, however, succinctly expresses what others say in a more roundabout manner,[30] when he says that such caricature "is to character what epigram is to fact, - a mode of conveying truth more distinctly by suggesting it through

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[29] Whipple confuses old John Willet with his son, Joe.

[30] The idea is not new, though. See above,pp.47,53 (Lister and Poe).

a brilliant exaggeration." The reader's mind, according to Whipple, limits Dickens's extravagance and "discerns the actual features and lineaments of character shining the more clearly through it." The method is not the finest, Whipple says,[31] but it must be accepted because of its "piercing insight into actual life." Dickens may be a caricaturist of a sort, but of a superior kind, because whereas a caricaturist "rarely presents anything but a man's peculiarity," Dickens "always presents the man," he is always true to human nature.

That a more or less profound knowledge of character is clearly and vividly expressed through a degree of exaggeration is also suggested by Forster in his review of David Copperfield, in the Examiner (4 December 1850, p.798), when he says of the comic characters, "The cherished and absurd peculiarities lose nothing of their prominence, but the characteristics of the heart which they cannot obscure or destroy are all the more quaintly and forcibly presented." William Hickson, in the Westminster Review (April 1847, Collins p.226), however, says that there is little exaggeration to object to in Dombey and Son, although "In the humorous parts of the narrative, there is as usual a vein of caricature, but not too extravagant, nor more than is required to render the descriptions graphic." Because caricature leads to some loss of truthfulness it is treated warily, and Hickson does not seem to see in it a heightening of truth. At best it makes for vividness, and even then he feels that it must be kept under control.

While the praise for vividness and vitality may degenerate into seeing Dickens's fancy and imagination - whether comic or not - as a source of amusement or a means merely of lending colour to his work, there are a number of critics who make some attempt to reconcile nature and art. Often the vividness and vitality is said to lead to a greater

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[31] It limits Dickens's stature a little. See below, p. 276.

sense of reality. Charles Kent, for example, reviewing Dombey and Son in the Sun (13 April 1848, Collins pp.228-29), notes that Dickens "sketches a locality with as much vividness as a painter, and . . . imparts to a fictitious being an absolute and visible individuality." His imagination, that is, creates characters who are "as actual as flesh and blood, as true as humanity." Kent does not discuss only comic characters, but he recognises that there is more to Dickens's characterisation than merely colouring unreal figures into life by "the lustre of his imagination." Forster, reviewing the same novel, in the Examiner (28 October 1848, Collins p.233), also attempts to reconcile nature and art in his discussion of the world of Dickens's fiction, although he too is not merely discussing the comic. Though the characters are products of Dickens's imagination, they are accepted as real people, Forster says, and though the events are seemingly unnatural in themselves, they are made to seem natural because they are part of, and are explained by, the rest of the novel. The reality of the everyday world must be in the novel, but the novelist is not restricted to it. Forster therefore discerns two senses of the word "nature." In the first place it means the everyday, the usual, the understandable, all of the things that men can verify by their own observation and experience; but there is a "higher" sense in which the word refers to what might be, given certain circumstances. For Forster, Dickens combines both kinds of "nature" in his works. In Dombey and Son, "with no abatement of the life and energy which in his earlier works threw out such forcible impressions of the actual, we have in a far higher degree the subtler requisites which satisfy imagination and reflection." This is a repetition, almost word for word, of what he said about Martin Chuzzlewit,[32] and Forster is clearly doing his best for Dickens in trying to make his readers see

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[32] See above, p.60.

that he is much more than a mere exaggerator. He pays tribute again here to the vividness of Dickens's art, and argues that Mr. Dombey and Edith are not caricatures because, according to the fictional world they inhabit, their antecedents are such as make them what they are. Fiction is to be accounted for by its own natural laws, but the "higher nature" he speaks of is not far removed from the nature of actuality.

What Forster in fact argues for is a kind of "idealism." This idea is taken up and applied more closely to the comedy by David Masson, reviewing Thackeray's Pendennis alongside David Copperfield, in the North British Review (May 1851). Thackeray, he says, (Collins pp.255-56) is "essentially an artist of the real school," whereas Dickens "works more on the ideal." It is nonsense, he says, to call Dickens's characters lifelike, because "Not only are his serious or tragic creations . . . persons of romance; but even his comic or satiric portraitures do not come within the strict bounds of the real." Comic characters are, in a sense, ordinary, everyday people, but Masson points out that the Wellers, Mr. Pickwick,Micawber and Toots are "transcendental renderings of certain hints furnished by nature," in the creation of which Dickens, "seizing the notion of some oddity as seen in the real world," has "run away with it into a kind of outer or ideal region, there to play with it and work it out at leisure as extravagantly as he might choose, without the least impediment from any facts except those of his own story." Shakespeare, though on a higher level of achievement, uses a similar method : his characters are "grand hyperbolic beings created by the breath of the poet himself out of hints taken from all that is sublime in nature" (Collins p.257). Quoting Goethe, Masson says that art is called art precisely because it is not nature, and while he insists that nature be at the basis of art, Masson nevertheless allows Dickens some freedom in his comic art. It is fair, he says, to judge Thackeray by the canon of verisimilitude, but Dickens must be allowed "the right of

hyperbole." Masson's debt to Goethe[33] leads him to stress the artist's transcending of nature, which is apparent in Shakespeare,and on a lesser level, in Dickens's comic art. It also leads him to seek "harmony." Too much of what he calls "hyperbole" in art is not a good thing, and a "truer accusation" against Dickens is, he says, not that he is not truthful in the way Thackeray is, but that "in the exercise of the right of hyperbole, he does not always preserve harmony; that, in his romantic creations, he sometimes falls into the extravagant, and in his comic creations, sometimes into the grotesque." Here, Masson asks that a fictional creation should be a finished product, consistent with itself, and the grotesque appears to him to be lacking in careful artistic shaping. On the whole, though, he believes that Dickens is successful, and he extends his praise for the artistic heightening of the real that occurs in Dickens's works, in his British Novelists and Their Styles (1859).[34] Homer, Cervantes and Shakespeare, he says(p.250), are said to be true to nature, but their characters will not be found in the world exactly as they may be found in literature. In a character such as Mr. Micawber, Dickens transcends nature in the same way. Masson says (pp.251-52), "There never was a Mr. Micawber in nature, but Micawberism pervades nature through and through; and to have extracted this quality from nature is a feat of invention." The imagination of the comic artist - though Masson would say of the artist generally - does not forsake the real world, but it is not tied to it. The artist invents, but paradoxically he invents what is partly real, and ends up heightening it. Art is art, and not nature, Masson says, and while he stresses the art that transforms, others feel the need to show that Dickens's art, at least, has

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[33] Goethe's "On Truth and Probability of the Work of Art" argues for consistency in art and for art that is above, but not "out of"nature. See M.H. Abrams, op.cit. pp.278-79.

[34] This belongs in the next section, but since Masson's criticism is of a piece - partly because he condenses his 1851 article to suit his book - I discuss it here.

a basis in nature. Masson, however, keeps alive the kind of criticism seen best in the earlier period in Poe, and in fact his idea of "harmony" is similar to Poe's emphasis on "keeping."

The concern for consistency of characterisation which Poe and Masson develop briefly is also evident in Whipple's article in the North American Review (October 1849, Collins p.240). He says that Dickens "so preserves the keeping of character, that every thing said or done by his personages is either on a level with the original conception or develops it." It is already evident that reviewers do not expect mere copying of nature from Dickens and although they expect truthfulness, they begin to argue that his art includes exaggeration and needs to be judged by its own standards. Over-use of exaggeration must be decried, but restrained use of it is acceptable. Chorley in the Athenaeum (23 November 1850, p.1210), seems to be saying this, when he says "We do not demand from [Dickens] a sacrifice of that exaggeration in which his forte lies, so much as a distribution of it. We would not yield up any characteristics of so keen an observer . . . only bring them into greater harmony one with the other, and himself into better agreement with himself." But "observation" is still Dickens's strong point, in Chorley's view, and he seems in fact to be arguing both for "harmony" and for a greater degree of truth to nature as well. Chorley therefore applauds the movement away from exaggeration,which he detects in David Copperfield.

Two opposing view points may be observed in two reviews of David Copperfield. In the Spectator (23 November 1850, p.1119), the reviewer complains of the lack of careful structure in the novel and finds no consistency in the whole, nor any consistency between the parts. He is willing to dispense with "the great rule of unity of action," he says, so long as the novel has some ethical lesson for the reader, and so long

as it appeals to "the common kinship of humanity," but he finds none of these elements. Samuel Phillips, in The Times (11 June 1851, p.8) finds a moral lesson in the novel[35] and though at times he feels that Thackeray is more truthful, he seems also to have some doubts on the matter, because he says that while Thackeray has accurately described "the peculiarities of the world he depicts," Dickens "has more skilfully gauged universal humanity." The Yarmouth group is, we are told, "no exaggeration," and it evidences at once Dickens's "knowledge and imagination." Dickens's wider range of characterisation, which Horne said proved his wide knowledge of life, for Phillips is the cause of Dickens's occasionally getting out of his depth. Thackeray, dealing with a smaller cross-section of humanity, is safe within its confines, and Dickens fails, it seems, when he introduces details that are perhaps outside of his reviewers' experiences. However, the immediate cause for objection in this case is not a comic character, but Rosa Dartle, whom few Victorian reviewers understood, or perhaps, finding her disturbing or repugnant, did not wish to understand.[36]

An area of concern which has more relevance for the comic, and in which Dickens is often said to create untruthful characters, is in his portrayal of the higher classes of society. Phillips mildly objects to this, when he says "we must suppose either that people in the best society have not their tricks - little tricks of the body, that is - or else that Mr. Dickens has an unnatural faculty of detecting them." Phillips praises Dickens as much as he can, but he is clearly unsettled by the feeling that Dickens is not as "truthful" as might be wished. It seems strange that he should find the Peggottys true to nature and yet object

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[35] For the attitudes to morality in the novel, see below p. 139.

[36] See, for example, Fraser's Magazine (December 1850, Collins p.247), which dismisses her as unnatural and unnecessarily incongruous.

to the unnaturalness of the conversations between David and Steerforth and of the whole character of Rosa Dartle, but in the latter example his objection is prompted partly by moral considerations. And, as for many reviewers, a certain degree of social snobbishness allows him to react favourably to lower class eccentrics - he feels there were more eccentric characters in the lower orders - but leads him to reject the higher class ones. A similar concern, for these reasons, is also expressed earlier by Sharpe's London Magazine (May 1848, p.201): the aristocratic characters in all of Dickens's novels are painted as idiots, whereas in real life the aristocracy is honourable, talented, generous and above ridicule. The inference to be drawn from this seems to be that the lower class characters may be made to look ridiculous but the upper classes are not fit subjects for satire; the reviewer applauds Major Bagstock and Miss Tox as "real" characters. All of this follows on from a discussion of Dickens's faults which the reviewer, despite his professed admiration for the novels, feels he must point out. The first fault he discusses is the lack of truthfulness in Dombey and Son. There is, he says, a "good broad road of probability" down which Dickens may travel, and if he does not, his characters will fail to earn the readers' sympathy and to teach useful lessons.[37] It is necessary, the reviewer solemnly says, to protest against the falsities of fiction as much as to approve of its realities. What in fact happens is that his social sympathies are pricked by Dickens's satire of the upper classes and he feels the need to defend them more than the desire to evaluate the fiction.

Despite Sharpe's Magazine's objections, its review is fairly enthusiastic and not too adversely critical. Previous to it there had

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[37] Sharpe's Magazine is mentioned again below, p. 142.

been some harsh reviews of the Christmas Books, many of which objected to Dickens's politics as had reviewers of American Notes.[38] As in the reaction to American Notes, however, there is a strong vein of objection to the exaggeration and caricature that the Books contain. One of the harshest of these reviews is that in the Union Magazine (February 1846), where the writer says (p.223) that "Mr. Dickens's forte lies in extracting some touch of the picturesque from the hackneied circumstances which pave most of our paths in ordinary life, and his foible, in distorting them into the fantastic." In the Christmas Books - the review is of the first three - Dickens's "foible" is much in evidence. He employs " a mob of revel elves," the reviewer says (p.224), to hustle the readers off their legs, but insists that his fiction says something valid about the real world which it very imperfectly represents. Dickens's "reigning fallacy" is to immerse "real life in romance, in order to distil poetry from it (p.234)," but he achieves neither poetry nor truth, according to the reviewer. Partly the reviewer's objection is to Dickens's politics, but even when he agrees with Dickens's stance, as he does (p.233) when he gives limited praise to Alderman Cute, he dislikes the manner in which Dickens portrays him. But "poetry" in general, and not just the false "poetry" descried by the reviewer, is disliked by some because it appears to be out of place in a prose work. The Court Journal (21 December 1850, p.809), reviewing David Copperfield and Pendennis, says "Novels are supposed to be a description of life," and complains that Dickens is too "poetical" and imaginative. He is successful in creating purely imaginary characters, but "we miss in the creation the mark of actual existence." The beauty

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[38] Michael Slater, "The Christmas Books," Dickensian (January 1969, p.17) suggests that Dickens deliberately wrote The Chimes as a tract for the times, and predicted (Letters, Nonesuch I, p.557) that it would cause an uproar.

and drollery of the novels is evident, but in reading them the reader, according to the critic, seldom says "How true!" Yet the reviewer chooses two predominantly comic novels - Pickwick Papers and Nicholas Nickleby - to illustrate his point that Dickens might just as well have lived all his life at the top of the Duke of York's column for all the resemblance there is between his caricatures and reality. This should not be seen as a distrust of the imagination altogether, but "poetry" is felt to be out of place in the novel, and the strict demand for realism prevents the reviewer from accepting comic exaggeration. John Eagles, in Blackwood's Magazine (October 1848, p.468),also objects to the over-use of imagination in Dickens's work. The characters are always in extremes, "as if a painter should colour each individual in his grouping in the most searching light." This, he says, gives "a false view of life as it is," and Dickens, in over-colouring, appears not to give his readers any credit for imagination themselves.

Objection is also made to the unreality of recent works by Parker's London Magazine (February 1845, Collins p.169) which fancifully draws a distinction between "Boz," the writer of the early works, and "Dickens," of the Christmas Books and Martin Chuzzlewit. "Boz" accurately describes Cockney life, but "Dickens" has ventured into areas of life which are not suited to his "peculiar powers of satire and description." "Boz" described "real" people, but "Dickens" invents fictitious unrealities. Even earlier than this, the Monthly Review (September 1844, p.145) makes a similar point more charitably, about the creation of Mark Tapley. The reviewer says, "It would be no criterion to say we never knew such a character," but he is uncomfortable because Tapley seems to be a product of Dickens's "inventive genius" rather than a creation from reality. Tapley's actions in leaving the Blue Dragon because there is no credit in being "jolly" there are, the reviewer says, "too much a stretch of imagination for even Dickens to claim a licence for." Again, however,

morality triumphs, and Mark Tapley is accepted because he is a morally good and kindly character, but there is an unwillingness to accept the imaginative in fiction in these reviews, and though imagination is not decried as having no place in the novel, some reviewers are more strict in tying the novel to real life than are those who speak of idealism and imaginative heightening.

The novels in this period are received in ways that prefigure the harsher reactions to later novels, and American Notes and the Christmas Books draw similar criticisms. Dickens's satire is felt to be untruthful and offensive, and his characters are felt by some critics not to be true to nature. Blackwood's Magazine, beginning with its hostile review of American Notes, rarely has much good to say of Dickens. Warren, who had written the unfavourable review of American Notes, reviews the first Number of Dombey and Son, in Blackwood's Magazine (November 1846, p.638), and says that its thirty-two pages "contain very many provocatives to unfavourable criticism." They "bristle all over with mannerisms - abound with grotesque, unseemly, extravagant comparisons and personation," and "many of the scenes contain truth and humour smothered and lost by prolixity." It is no doubt Dickens's comic style that most bothers Warren, and he feels that it endangers the truthfulness of the fiction. Humour does not endanger truth, but it is not really humour that Dickens creates. This is the substance of the Rambler's later objection (September 1849, p.334) to David Copperfield. The comedy is just above the level of farce, the reviewer claims, and the characters have only just enough of humanity in them to save them from being outrageous improbabilities. The Prospective Review (July 1851, Collins p.265) seems to agree. The reviewer notes that David Copperfield is an improvement on Dombey and Son which, the reviewer says, "led many to despair of ever reading anything more from Mr. Dickens which was not either over-

charged or caricatured." Even more harsh is the review of the first Number of David Copperfield, in the Guardian (9 May 1849, p.304). Having made a hit with the Wellers, the reviewer says, Dickens has abundantly shown in every subsequent book, that he has "only one idea of men and women - the Sam Weller idea." All his characters are said to be "slang travesties of the respective persons in real life whom they are intended to represent." Major Bagstock is "an extravaganza that exists nowhere save in the crazed imagination of Mr. Charles Dickens," and Thackeray is "by far a truer and more real painter."

A criticism that is similar in its harshness and its statements appears during the publication of David Copperfield, in Thomas Powell's Pictures of the Living Authors of Britain (1851). Powell, in fact, includes a number of the objections seen earlier in this section, but like the Guardian reviewer, he finds that Dickens travesties reality, and says (p.97) in a statement that is similar to the Guardian's about the "Sam Weller idea of character," that men-milliners and virtuous nursery-maids appear, in his works, to be "the Alpha and Omega of mankind." Dickens can describe low life characters well, but Powell believes (p.96) that when he attempts "loftier and more complex phases of human nature," he fails, and he is therefore "perhaps one of the most one-sided delineators of the human family that ever enjoyed a popular reputation." Powell also accepts (p.103), however, that "like most humorists," Dickens "has a tendency to exaggeration," and he concedes that a certain amount of exaggeration may be "necessary to get the reader up to the author's mark," but he still considers that Dickens overdoes it. Dickens "sins in excess," for Powell as for a number of previous commentators. Yet the comedy still has its attraction, despite Powell's objections, and he adds (p.104) that "while the judicious blame the artist for his sacrifice of truth and nature, they laugh at the outrageousness of the distortion."

Often discussions of Dickens's imaginative "distortion" of the real or his travesties of human nature condemn the novels as wholes and include the comedy under a general objection. Those who admire Dickens, too, often include the comedy under a blanket of praise. Yet there is almost always some mention of the comic, even if it is only the quoting of a comic character in support of a general argument. There are several good, accommodating criticisms in this period which allow Dickens some latitude in his heightening of the real, whether comic or not. All critics would have agreed with the English Review (December 1848, p.272), that "truth is stronger than fiction," but the novelist's manner of conveying truth, it is recognised, may vary. The truth to life of his satire, clearly, is likely to be scrutinised most carefully, but there is a feeling that a degree of exaggeration is likely to be committed by the humorist. When "humour" is used as a general term, Dickens's exaggeration may be called in question, but when it is used with more specific reference to something different from and higher than farce and comic extravagance, there seems to be a feeling that it is not incompatible with truth. Exaggeration, reined in so that it gives a genial, pleasing account of human nature, creates humour; an excess of exaggeration distorts comedy into farce.

The best discussion specifically of the comedy in this period is made by Horne (1844, pp.40-42). He accepts the whole of Dickens's range - fun, farce and burlesque - but in effect shows that Dickens is better than a mere funster or farceur. When Mr. Bumble has been accepted by Mrs. Corney, Bumble does a solemn dance of joy round the tea-table while Mrs. Corney is out of the room.[39] Horne finds in this not only amusement but also revelation of Bumble's state of feeling, and he

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[39] Oliver Twist, chapter 23.

says that the humour of the scene shines through its fun. The author's "knowledge of life and character" shines, too, through the scene in which Mrs. Gamp seeks permission to do a half-day's duty for a fellow-nurse who wishes also to take on an extra patient.[40] The two nurses neglect their patients for half a day, therefore, and Mr. Mould agrees with the proposal because he "has a good chance of a funeral or two" among them. This, and other scenes, Horne says, shows Dickens's knowledge of "his men." Here humour and truth are clearly not felt to be incompatible, and Horne does not sacrifice humour for truth. Truth must be there, and fiction that is not truthful is inferior, but it takes the more perceptive and the more tolerant critics to discover it in Dickens's comedy. Unfortunately, Dickens's later novels have more in them that offends, and the irascible and intolerant critics begin to have more to say.

The Later Novels : 1853 - 1870

This section begins with adverse criticism similar to those discussed in the previous section. Although there is a large number of novels and critics to be included here, the terms of the attacks on and defences of Dickens's work are predictable to a certain extent, and need not be exhaustively illustrated. The attacks on Dickens's later novels in this period are well known, but many of the persuasive and sensible defences of them are not, and to avoid giving an impression of overwhelming opposition to Dickens, I shall emphasise the anti-Dickensian arguments first, before spending some time on favourable reviews.

The charge of caricature is persistently made in this part of his career. Even the usually favourable Chorley, in the Athenaeum (17 September 1853, Collins p.276), says of Bleak House, "There is progress in art to be praised in this book, - and there is progress in exaggeration to be deprecated . . . Were its opening pages in anywise accepted as represent-

[40] Martin Chuzzlewit, chapter 25.

ing the world we live in, the reader might be excused for feeling as though he belonged to some orb where eccentrics, Bedlamites, ill-directed and disproportioned people were the only inhabitants." The Athenaeum, in fact, remains favourable to Dickens, but this statement could have appeared in any one of the journals which consistently oppose him in this period. Blackwood's Magazine and the Rambler have always opposed him in the past, and the Westminster Review and Fraser's Magazine almost always, while the Spectator, in the early 1850s, enters its phase of hostility to Dickens which lasts until the end of the sixties, when a fairer and generally encouraging position is adopted, The most formidable opponent in the field is, of course, the notorious Saturday Review, whose aristocratic, Oxbridgean bias is directed against all popular literature, and especially against Dickens, the leader of popular writers. All of these journals share with the Saturday Review a highly educated readership in the upper and upper middle classes, and frequently they simply demand from Dickens what they know he will not supply, and because of his failure to supply it, they relegate him to the lower ranks of literature. For example, they expect his work to be more realistic and intellectual than it is, and they ridicule him for not satisfying their expectations.

George Brimley, in the Spectator (24 September 1853, p.924), for example, in his review of Bleak House, compares Dickens with the farce-writer in his method of characterisation, which consists, we are told, in the selection of "that which is purely outward and no way significant of the man, an oddity of feature, a trick of gesture or of phrase." This is caricature, which is marked, for most reviewers, by its shallowness in the reading of character, and if the people met in the novels are real people, they are considered, for example by William Forsyth, in Fraser's Magazine (March 1857, Collins p.350), as "strange, grotesque, out-of-the-way people, of whom we hardly ever meet the prototypes in

flesh and blood." At fault is Dickens's manner of presentation, too. Dickens, according to Forsyth, always "fastens some distinctive oddities upon two or three of his characters, and never allows them to speak without bringing out the peculiarity in the most marked and prominent manner." The criticism is comprehensive. Dickens is unable to present the inner man, and even his external characterisations are not of the common run of humanity. When Henry James reviews Our Mutual Friend, in the Nation (21 December 1865, Collins p.470), and objects that "every character here put before us is a mere bundle of eccentricities, animated by no principle of nature whatsoever," he follows a strong critical trend. James's criticism is rather severe. Dickens, he says (p.471), no longer describes humanity, for this is "what men have in common." Rather, he describes "what they have in distinction;" and the characters not only have nothing in common with mankind, they have only in common with each other the fact that they are all inhuman.

The Westminster Review (April 1866, Collins pp.474 ff.) contains a number of the attitudes of such-minded critics, as if in summary, and the reviewer seems to echo James when he says that the characters are "a bundle of deformities." Dickens does not satisfy the demand that the writer should describe humanity, nor does he transcend nature. Everything in the novel is not above nature, but outside it. The strongly rationalist and practical Westminster reviewers are rarely tolerant of Dickens's imaginative fiction and probably would not react favourably to a transcending of nature unless it were very close to the facts. Unfavourable attitudes to Dickens are seen elsewhere. One method of transcending nature is by the use of idealism, which is discussed by George Stott, in the Contemporary Review (February 1869, pp.208-9). There is a tacit assumption, Stott says, that "idealization implies the exaltation[41] of the characters idealized," but he argues that it may

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[41] Stott's emphasis.

equally lead to the grotesque. Both farce and caricature, he says, show man at his worst and this is as much the result of idealisation as is Italian art which shows man at his heroic best. Dickens's "idealism" had earlier been discussed by Masson[42] and others, to show that he transcends nature in an acceptable way, but Stott attempts to show that the kind of transcending that is apparent in Dickens's work is not really admirable. He picks out one of the commonest defences of Dickens by his supporters and turns the tables on them using their own terminology. Stott then goes on to explain why Dickens's genius is "essentially akin to that of the farce-writer and the caricaturist." He supplies no "pictures of life," but creates instead a "funny fairyland" whose inhabitants are created by "the lavish use of the exaggerations and distortions, the tricks and artifices of caricature" (p.209). The minuteness of elaborate detail in Dickens suggests that he should be numbered among the realists, Stott says a little earlier (p.207), but the realism is illusory and in fact "we are introduced to a state of things quite inconsistent with fact - a world peopled by grotesque impossibilities." The terms of Stott's indictment - pictures of life, realism, and fact - show an uncompromising attitude to imaginative heightening, and it will become clear during this section that critics are divided on the role of imagination in literature and the position of Dickens in relation to the Realists.

In fact, Stott's need to point out that Dickens is no realist is felt much earlier, by the Illustrated Times (8 December 1855, p.435). The reviewer of the first Number of Little Dorrit says, "There is a common notion that Dickens's strong point is real life. This is quite a fallacy. His strong point is romantic and poetic talent - imagination

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[42] See above, p.65.

and phantasy - as you will see if you meditate one of his characters, and try and conceive it apart from the halo of fancy, grotesque fun, &c., which he has thrown round and round it." This question is again raised after Dickens's death. The Illustrated London News (18 June 1870,p.639), while believing that he is strongest in creating odd, eccentric characters, says that he is among the "ablest authors of our day" who have "kept within the realistic lines." The Times (10 June 1870, p.9) too, says that "all men" have accepted Dickens's characters as "the true reflection of human nature," but this obituary is mentioned by Alfred Austin, in the Temple Bar Magazine (July 1870, p.561), who says that he totally dissents from the opinion that Dickens is "an eminently realistic writer" who is "an humble and accurate imitator of actual life." But Austin says this because he believes that no realistic writer can be a great writer, and that Dickens, by his idealism and imagination, attained a height "to which the realistic novelist cannot even look up" (p.562).

Yet another possible argument is illustrated, however, by George Woods in the Old and New Magazine (November 1870, p.533). He notes Dickens's "extravagant caricatures, rather than true humorous creations," and says that Dickens and his admirers would agree that these have been painted from living originals. Thus Woods argues that it is mere observation and not true creative power that creates such characters as Pumblechook, Sapsea and Honeythunder. "The blood of life does not run through their veins," he says, because realism - by which he seems to mean the mere copying of externals - "is not art." An actual personage may be transferred from life to the page "as by the photographer's camera, and yet be a monstrosity there." Mrs. Gamp is, however, praiseworthy because though Dickens "probably never met" her, she is "as solid an addition to the characters of the world as Falstaff and Sancho Panza." This appears to be a fairly complex attitude to realism and the use of the imagination, but it is based on the reviewer's distaste for caricature.

Caricature is not art, nor, in his opinion, is photographic realism. Both are preoccupied with externals. The true creator of character understands the inner life of his characters and conveys his understanding to the reader. Woods seeks imagination in art, but like many of his predecessors he likes it to create the illusion of reality. He seems to take at face value the claim made by Dickens's supporters that his seemingly impossible characters were copied from life, and he argues accordingly, that mere copying of externals is not art. Creativity is superior to copying, but creation of the impossible is not necessarily acceptable: a basis of the real is needed.

The demand for imagination in literature and a consequent distaste for extreme realism appears much earlier, however. In the American University Quarterly (January 1860, p.97), Frank A. Walker seems to have become tired of those who place Thackeray above Dickens because of his supposed greater truthfulness to life. The humorist, he says, works from "a ground-work of truth," but this truth is "varied in circumstance and appearance, or modified in essence." Like Woods, he finds "truth" in humour, but unlike Woods, finds it in Dickens's humour. Woods seems to think that Dickens is too faithfully true to the odd in life, but Walker claims that Dickens's art is imaginative. Thackeray, for him, copies facts, but if it is accepted that imagination has a role in literature, Dickens's imaginative truth is superior to Thackeray's "facts" because "truth becomes fact only as it is alloyed and confused with that which is base or trivial. This is sorrowfully so; to gloat over it, and exaggerate its deformity is a miserable kind of Realism." In this way, Walker turns the tables on the Realists - seemingly at Thackeray's expense - and realism is branded as being unimaginative and even a distortion of truth. The kind of truth Walker seeks is truth to the fundamentals of life - the "ground-work of truth" - but he seeks also some kind of imaginative heightening, in which he finds higher truths.

It seems therefore that, in the debate between Realism and its opponents, Dickens is claimed by both sides even though he really only suits those who do not greatly admire Realism.

But to read some of the adverse criticisms, one would not have thought that there was any chance of Dickens's being confused with the Realists. The Saturday Review (17 September 1870, p.369) attacks Mr. Honeythunder as a grotesque wooden figure, both lifeless and unamusing, and this is the kind of criticism that had been, almost invariably, levelled at Dickens by the magazine since it began reviewing his work. The paradox that a more creative novelist describes more realistic[43] characters is expressed by the Roman Catholic Rambler (January 1862, Collins p.437), in a review of Great Expectations, when it says, " A novelist of more creative genius describes not a particular individual, but a general character, summed up in one, but fitting many, like Major Pendennis." The very defence begun by earlier critics is here dismissed by a reviewer who, like many of his contemporaries, distrusts the kind of imaginative creation that is not easily checked against the real world for its veracity. McCarthy, in the Westminster Review (October 1864, p.424) - perhaps not unaware of the irony of his statement - complains that in Hard Times Dickens allows his fancy to run away with him. "With much submission to Mr. Ruskin,[44]" he says, "imagination is not exactly the most truth-telling faculty of the human mind," because it "sometimes misleads," and sometimes it "overpowers by its own brilliancy." Most often, McCarthy believes, "it destroys the effect of a whole by the prominence which it gives to subsidiary parts." The use of fancy prevents Dickens from being a great artist and from being the philosopher McCarthy

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[43] These are distinct from Realistic characters, the characters created by the Realists.

[44] See Modern Painters, volume two. Works, edd. Cook and Wedderburn (1904, vol.6).

sees him as making claims to be.[45]

Ruskin, however, does not intend that imagination should lead too far from reality, and he too complains that Dickens caricatures, in his famous note on Hard Times, in Unto This Last, in the Cornhill Magazine (August 1860, p.159). Yet, Ruskin's point is that, despite Dickens's caricature, if we allow for his "manner of telling things," there is "wit and insight" in what he ways. Dickens's work should, Ruskin says, be carefully studied by those who are interested in social questions. Such people, "will find much that is partial, and, because partial, apparently injust; but if they examine all the evidence on the other side, which Dickens seems to overlook, it will appear, after all their trouble, that his view was the finally right one, grossly and sharply told." There may not be an exact representation of the world in Dickens's works, that is, but truth is not therefore necessarily absent. The kind of truth Ruskin finds is similar to that found by Walker and others, and it is his respect for the imagination that stops him from dismissing out of hand what at first sight appears not to be true to nature or to the facts with which Dickens, as satirist, purports to deal.

To the rationalists and realists in philosophy and fiction, however, the imagination is dangerous, especially when it meddles with politics and society. At Fitzjames Stephen puts it, in the Edinburgh Review (July 1857, p.125), novels "address themselves almost entirely to the imagination upon subjects which properly belong to the intellect," such as politics. The proper sphere of the novelist, according to Stephen, is "domestic relations," and the novel has no power to deal with any question which does not come under this head. The religious are also at times unlikely to trust the imagination , when it fails to teach moral lessons. For example, the Christian Spectator (December 1865, p.721) says of the Dickens world, "It is not our world; the world of

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[45] See below, p. 228.

duty, temptation and hopes; but it is one into which we are sometimes glad to escape." Evangelical doctrine stressed duty and involvement with the world. Escape might be attractive, but it could not really be condoned, and luckily for Dickens the reviewer finds valuable moral lessons in his work. But such an attitude is not peculiar to evangelical reviewers - for almost all Victorian critics of Dickens, even if reality may be heightened in fiction, it must not be abandoned. Thus the rationalists, the realists and the evangelicals all have their reasons for distrusting an over-use of imagination.

Opposition to Dickens is sometimes caused by class difference and political viewpoint. The Spectator (20 July 1861, p.784) does not relent in its opposition, even in a review of Great Expectations, a novel in which even the Saturday Review finds praiseworthy material. The Spectator continues with its usual criticism,that Dickens paints "the accidents, not the essence of human character," and adds that this is especially so when he describes "the more educated ranks of society," because their professions or their inward characters do not shine through their exteriors, and since Dickens relies on describing striking externals, his upper-class characters fail. This is said also by Brimley, in his review of Bleak House in the same periodical (24 September 1853, p.924). He objects to the Dedlock family and surmises that either Dickens knows nothing of such people, or their external appearances do not offer enough that is funny or grotesque, and Dickens is forced to caricature them in order to make them interesting. This kind of statement may also be found in the Westminster Review (October 1854, Collins p.307), where it is stated that Dickens's method of studying lower-class oddities from the outside is both acceptable and successful, but when he describes more cultivated characters who have no external peculiarities,he fails because he is unable (through ignorance of such people) to work from the inside. Often it appears as if reviewers who make such statements

cannot see further than the externals of Dickens's characters because in real life they do not see further than the outsides of people in the lower orders. The class snobbishness of such statements may also be seen in the Saturday Review's reaction (11 November 1865, Collins pp.462-63) to the satire of the Veneerings and Podsnaps,[46] and in Stott's comment, in the Contemporary Review (February 1869, p.223), that Dickens can describe ordinary people well but "seems incapable of creating a gentleman."

Most objection to Dickens's satire, indeed, comes from critics who are of different political, social or religious viewpoint. Even if they recognise that he does not attempt faithfully to represent the institutions he attacks, they adversely criticise him because they feel his opinions are mistaken. And sometimes they claim that his imperfect delineations of institutions reflect his imperfect understanding of them. Imaginative heightening, accepted to a degree in ordinary and humorous creation of character, is regarded, therefore, with more suspicion when it appears in satiric characters or scenes. Important issues are at stake, and most critics and the journals they work for have varying standpoints which colour their literary criticism. Fitzjames Stephen is a leading figure in the protests against Dickens's satires in this period. In the Edinburgh Review (July 1857, pp.126-27) he protests against Dickens's injustice to some of the institutions of English society and his animosity to the aristocracy, but the journal Stephen writes mostly for is the Saturday Review. In an earlier article in the Saturday Review (3 January 1857, Collins pp.347-48), Stephen protests particularly against Dickens's comic exaggeration of social and political abuses. To many people, he says, Jarndyce vs Jarndyce represents the Court of Chancery and the Circumlocution Office represents Downing Street.

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46 See below, pp.158-59.

"To any one who remonstrates," however, the comic writer's answer would be that "it is nothing but a fair representation of what exists, just exaggerated enough to make the subject entertaining. In this, no doubt, there is a certain amount of truth; and so there is in the plea of the old woman who destroys her neighbour's character over her tea, that she only adds colour enough to her story to make it piquant." Artistic exaggeration, Stephen insists, is a "fallacy," especially when the truth about important social or political matters is deformed. At best, Dickens tells half-truths, and where an abuse does exist, he highly exaggerates it. The comic novelist, Stephen fears, escapes responsibility for his lies or half-truths because when he is contradicted he merely laughs and pretends he was only in sport.

All of the opposition, from the Edinburgh Review, the Saturday Review and others, to the satire of the later novels, is founded on the conviction that Dickens's views are wrong - he has made an error, or he is deliberately telling lies. In July 1857, the Leader takes up issue first with the Edinburgh Review and then with the Saturday Review over the satire of Little Dorrit.[47] It is amusing, the writer says (11 July 1857, p.664), to hear the reviewer in the Edinburgh Review "censure Mr. Dickens's pleasant fiction of the Circumlocution Office in the most solemn tones, as though it were offered as a full and fair account of the whole science and art of government." The defence of Dickens's right to satirise Government and its officials is, largely, sensible and effective, but it is as much founded on the Leader's belief that Dickens is right as Fitzjames Stephen's opposition is based on a conviction that he is wrong, as the Leader shows, in its own review of Little Dorrit on

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47 See the Leader 4,11,18 July and 1 August, and the Saturday Review 11 and 18 July. Reviews of Little Dorrit in these journals appear on 25 June and 4 July respectively.

25 June 1857 (Collins, p.364), when it praises Dickens's "independence of thought" and the "truth of his scorching satire." Ruskin's agreement with Dickens's social teaching, too, depends on his belief that Dickens is right in what he says. Both defenders and opponents have, underlying their arguments, a basic decision whether Dickens is right or wrong, which they may then proceed to justify on "artistic" grounds.

In a long and persuasive article in the National Review (July 1861) on Martin Chuzzlewit (recently reprinted), the reviewer agrees with what Dickens says about America. There may be Americans like Mr. Bevan, the reviewer says (p. 142), but he feels that too many of the "very noxious, ill-bred, swaggering, silly set of persons" have got into the "most prominent places in their social scheme," and Dickens's satire against them is both justified and truthful. Again, this depends heavily on the fact that the reviewer agrees with Dickens's attitude, but the reviewer's argument in favour of the partial truth[48] of the satirist is interesting. He says (p.139) that "the whole representation of America may be more ludicrous than America is in reality; but the separate facts are not exaggerations further than the skill of the artist, which brings out forcibly every point he takes, makes a certain degree of exaggeration inevitable." And to clarify even further this point about the satirist's tendency to exaggerate, he goes on to say (pp.143-44), of the satires in more recent novels, " The court of Chancery was, until its recent changes, most dismally slow, expensive, and disappointing; and in many public offices nothing was done, and done in a pompous and imposing manner, as if to do nothing was a laudable and gentlemanly thing in a public officer. The comic writer satirised that which was ridiculous and foolish, and left out of sight what was commendable in the institutions .... The criticism that, if we look at the whole truth, we ought to say

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[48] I mean this in a slightly different sense from Ruskin's. See above p. 82.

that the institutions were substantially good, but with a few striking flaws, does not touch the comic writer. He only affects to address himself to a partial truth; and if he brings that truth into a strong light, he has effected his aim." Like the writer in the Leader mentioned above, and like Ruskin, the reviewer here asserts that the satirist need not be concerned with the complexity and fairness of his attacks. And exaggeration is not only acceptable to the reviewer, but in his opinion it may be an essential part of the satirist's method. If this is so, it may be unreasonable to ask the satirist accurately to represent life or comprehensively to debate any topic which he may include in his work. The truth needs to be there, but it need not be the whole truth.

In non-satiric comedy, the process is sometimes said to be similar. Walker, in the University Quarterly (January 1860, p.98),says that only a "ground-work of truth" is necessary to humour, and he asks "What difference is there whether the novelist pictures a few real characters in his work and infers from them, or first philosophizes in a broad, crowded world of life, and, from a myriad of characters, idealizes beings possessing more than the significance of any actual, and thus makes, as it were, his whole tale a moral?" There is no difference in "truth," he says, but there is a great difference in power, because truth is a higher thing than mere fact. Thackeray describes facts by keeping as close to real life as possible, but Dickens, through the use of his imagination, reaches higher truths and creates better art. Walker appears to place together two ideas which are not entirely separable. To see the characters as "types" seems to stress the underlying reality, and to see them as being idealised seems to emphasise the art that heightens, but the distinction is not always clear. Still discussing Dickens's satirical method, Forster[49], in his review of Little Dorrit in the

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49 I assume it is Forster, who left the Examiner in 1853, but may still have written reviews of Dickens's works.

Examiner (13 June 1857, p.372), adds another term. He praises Barnacle as the idealisation or "personification" of "a common abuse in statemanship" in the mode of Pecksniff, who "personifies" a "particular form of hypocrisy." Forster continues to say that each of these personifications must be regarded as "one of the elements of truth reduced to its pure state by the chemistry of genius" rather than as the "ordinary compound truth which enters into every-day life." In justification of the method, Forster argues, "Of course one may complain of the chemist who experiments on oxygen that it is air with the nitrogen improperly left out," and so one may complain of Dickens's sketch of the Circumlocution Office, he says, "that it shows only one half of the constitution of the air in Downing Street." The same might be said, Forster adds, of many of the characters, because "nearly all the elements of which the world is made, when seen alone, can be seen as only monstrosities in nature." The analogy suggests, of course, that Dickens's art is not only true to basic nature, but that it makes use of the essential elements of nature, just as the chemist who works with oxygen uses the most important element of air. Dickens's truth is only partial, but it is not therefore negligible, and, in fact, his method makes truth more easily visible. A similar analogy[50] appears two years earlier, in the Ecclesiastic and Theologian (October 1855, p.470) where it is argued that Dickens's truth is at once "more and less than the whole truth." The novelist's method is similar to that of a "chemist or mechanical philosopher" who, wishing to illustrate a particular effect and its cause, selects a phenomenon in which they can be seen more

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[50] These "scientific" analogies are interesting, because the Realists and Naturalists often see the novelist as some kind of scientist, and Dickens's critics defend him against Realist criticism by claiming for him similar methods.

easily than they can in the real world. The novelist, in like fashion, "takes human nature as it were into the laboratory, selects the character with which he wishes to make us familiar, and holds it up to view, with some of its features exaggerated indeed, but not falsified . . . . There are fewer characteristics, and therefore each must occupy a more prominent place than if it were curbed and neutralised by others." Exact truth to nature may not be required by the reviewer, but falsity in the novelist is deplored as much as it would be in the chemist. The reviewer finds fault with Mr. Chadband, for example, not because he is a satire of a religious hypocrite - the reviewer is careful to say this - but because he is completely unnatural. The analogy to the chemist, used by the Examiner and the Ecclesiastic and Theologian is designed to give the artist some freedom with which to demonstrate truths about human nature or about social institutions. But significantly, the aim of the scientist is to seek truth, and if truth is permitted to be modified, it must nevertheless be present and be made clearly visible. By exaggerating, Dickens suggests truth more clearly. This is recognised also by S.F. Williams, discussing Pickwick Papers in the Rose Shamrock and Thistle (IV, 1864, p.77),who says that readers are "never led away into mistaking the excess for the truth." They "allow so much discount" and see truth beneath the heightened exteriors of the characters.

The idea that the characters are "types," denied by the Rambler,[51] is suggested by Forster and Walker, and, in varying ways, by others. The Leader (25 June 1857, Collins pp.363-64) recognises the psychological truthfulness of William Dorrit and Mr. Merdle, and the reviewer says, of the latter of the two, that although it is well known that he is a portrait from life, he is "not merely a reflex of one individual," but of a whole

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[51] See above, p. 81.

class of men. W.H. Dixon in the Athenaeum (6 June 1857, p.724), seems to recognise the same thing when he predicts that the novel "will meet with opposition from the Barnacles and the Merdles, and from all who are interested in the maintenance of humbug and circumlocution." On the other hand, the Eclectic Review (October 1861, p.463) prefers to stress the individuality of the characters. Dickens does not give us types or representatives of classes, but rather describes "humanity in all its little details." This is merely the reverse of the coin because in his creation of idealised types, Dickens is seen to overlay basic human characteristics with vivifying detail, so that his characters seem so different from real people and from each other, yet basically are true to nature.

Some reviewers argue that Dickens's novels describe the real world, because the real world is, in fact, like the Dickens world, or at least it could be so with very little change. G.F. Talbot, in Putnam's Monthly Magazine (March 1855, p.268) speaks of Dickens's tendency to "heighten the illusion of reality" by the use of unusual speech, grimaces, eccentricities of movement, and whimsicality of habit." He says, "In fact Mr. Dickens's creations are too intensely individual to be true to ordinary life. This is the reason why, upon some prosaic and exact minds, they have the unpleasant effect of caricature." In ordinary life, men rarely reveal their true selves, but revelation comes in periods of great excitement or when they are "under the spell of some great mind." In Dickens's novels, the characters are under such a spell, and there is such an atmosphere of "excitement" that "true acting and true speaking" become "natural." The world of the novels is not like the real world as it is, but it is what the real world might be like if all restraint were taken away. Talbot here does not seem to make his point clear, but he suggests that the Dickens world is a kind of fantasy of life which is in essentials not untruthful to real life,

and that real life itself is only different because its conventions and patterns of behaviour are rigidly enforced. Dickens's imagination pierces conventional behaviour and shows men as they are. Talbot spends some time discussing Dickens's comedy, but his argument at this point does not refer merely to comic characters. Nor does Forster's argument, in the Examiner (8 October 1853, Collins p.292), but with Talbot's it shows the lengths to which Dickens's favourable critics will go in order to prove the truthfulness of his characters. The characters "personify some main idea" and "are ever found universally applicable." Some people seem to require that character should be dissected psychologically and analysed minutely, but, Forster argues, this in itself is unlife-like. We see nobody minutely in real life and men have contact with each other only by the touching of their extremes.[52] The salient points of character are therefore what the novelist finds most useful, and the reader instinctively fills in the rest of the sketch, just as he does in real life when he assesses his fellowmen. The greatest writers in all literature have used this method, Forster claims, correctly pointing out that character-analysis is not necessarily more realistic, but is a literary convention. Forster is asking for a more subtle reading of Dickens's characters, in reaction against the too-ready dismissal of them by hostile critics, and, noting the tendency to expect of fictional characters what may be expected of real people, he argues that their acquaintance needs to be made in a similar way. Life is "read" as literature is, and vice versa.

In all of the reviewers' comments, the concern for truth may be observed, and whether they believe that Dickens is not truthful either in his portraits of humanity or in his statements about social institutions, for example, or whether they find truth that is heightened or made

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[52] This passage is repeated in Forster's Life, discussed below, p. 101.

pleasing in some way, their demand that truth be present is unvarying. Clearly the tendency for Dickens's comedy to include the exaggerated, the eccentric, the unusual and the fanciful, places some strain on the reviewers who find that a central canon of literary judgment appears not to be respected. The simple answer is that exaggerated art is inferior, and an equally simple answer is that Dickens is a truth-teller. Truth-tellers in all ages have been persecuted says Dixon in the Athenaeum (6 June 1857, p.724), so it is not surprising to find that Dickens is too, while Blanchard Jerrold, in the Gentleman's Magazine (July 1870, pp.236-37) solemnly brings forward the might of the British Medical Journal and the Law Journal[53] to vouch for the accuracy with which Dickens describes disease, death and lawyers. But aside from such simple statements, there are a number of elaborate attempts to reconcile Dickens's outward lack of truthfulness with the feeling that he is basically true. Where it is a matter of political opinion, few questions are settled, but the large question remains, whether the Dickens world is true to the real world. Some reviewers are undecided on the question of truth. Bentley's Miscellany (October 1853, Collins p.289) finding both truth and falsity in Bleak House, says that, "if the whole of such a work . . . were equal to its parts, what a book it would be," but there are more decisive - and more fruitful - comments elsewhere. Many of the discussions I have quoted above range - quite naturally - beyond the comedy, because discussions of Dickens's comedy raises important critical questions; and where comedy does not spark the debate, it is usually referred to or is of some relevance. The whole situation may be summed up to an extent by consideration of a series of articles by R.H. Hutton, in the Spectator, at the end of Dickens's career. Hutton is fully aware of the comedy's importance,

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[53]No dates or page references are given by Gentleman's Magazine.

and he discusses intelligently the relationship between the comedy of the novels and the need for the truth in fiction.

In an article entitled "Mr. Dickens's Moral Services to Literature," in the Spectator (17 April 1869, p.474), Hutton praises Dickens, as a humorist, above Aristophanes and Shakespeare.[54] On successive weeks, after Dickens's death, 11, 18 and 25 June 1870, the opinion is repeated, but in the 18 June issue, a correspondent, J. Hain Friswell, questions such high praise.[55] While Shakespeare paints ab intra, Dickens can only work ab extra, Friswell says, and the result is that while Shakespeare gives us human nature, Dickens can, at best, only give "particulars and classes." Dickens has nothing to compare with Falstaff, nor even with Shakespeare's lesser comic characters,[56] in their truthfulness to human nature. This suggests what I shall show below,[57] that some of the things claimed for Dickens by his defenders limit his stature: the creation of classes or types may mean no more than that he is good in a limited range, but that he has not created universal humanity. Hutton does not claim that Dickens is on the same level as Shakespeare in this respect, but shows that he had not intended to place Dickens on that level in the first place. He says, "We do not believe . . . . that Dickens ever drew a real character. Mrs. Gamp is - in a very true sense - though it sounds paradoxical, ... his highest idealism.

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54 See below, p.297.

55 repr. Dickensian (June 1905, pp.146-47). Also in Friswell's Modern Men of Letters Honestly Criticised (1870, pp.43-44).

56 This assessment of his stature is discussed below, p. 297 too.

57 p. 313.

Shakespeare hardly ever created a character that was not real in its whole basis. But as a feat of humour[58], we do seriously hold that Mrs. Gamp stands above Shakespeare's greatest efforts in the same direction." What is meant by Dickens's "idealism" is explained in the same issue (18 June 1870, p.750). Dickens may appear to be a realist, but in fact he re-arranges reality like a "moral kaleidoscope." Mrs. Gamp, for example, is based on an idea, that of selfishness, and Dickens continually plays upon the idea, placing her in varying situations all different and all minutely described in their circumstances, but always Mrs. Gamp illustrates the idea that forms the basis of her nature. This is not realism, it shows no depth of knowledge of human nature, and it entails no analysis of character, but it makes Dickens a great humorist. Hutton is apparently anxious to justify what he says here, because on the following week he returns with yet another article entitled "What is Humour?" This has been discussed above [59] because of Hutton's definition of humour as a mode involving paradoxical shifting from one state of personal feeling to another almost inconceivable in relation to it. The humorist, Hutton says, may achieve his end best by "careful selection" and "subtle exaggeration" of moral qualities. Pecksniff, for example, is "vastly overdrawn," but there is therefore more, not less, of humour in him. Humour, which depends on the reader's surprise at the incongruity, may be greater when the humorist has "left something out of nature, and perhaps exaggerated something in it." Dickens's best characters, Hutton concludes, are "pure embodiments of his humour, - not real characters at all, but illustrations . . . of the deepest moral incongruities of the heart."

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[58] The emphasis is Hutton's here and above.

[59] See pp.15-16.

Hutton's argument is cogent and persuasive, and he strikes a balance between those who condemn Dickens for his exaggeration and superficiality in the creation of character and those who find truths about human nature heightened by art. Hutton finds both, but he tones down the arguments of both sides. Dickens is neither as full of insight nor as lacking in it as the two opposing groups make out. Hutton writes on Dickens almost throughout the rest of the period under survey and he substantially repeats these arguments and the general assessment that Dickens is a great humorist but no more than that,[60] each time. His enthusiasm for Dickens's humour is genuine, but his assessment is echoed by others, in a much more condescending way, especially in the generation after Dickens's death.

The arguments which seek to reconcile Dickens's art with truth may be seen in this period as in the last, with the difference that the opposition becomes much more aggressive and the defences become more elaborate. Not all that I have discussed has had a direct bearing on the comic, but this is partly because the attacks and defences are made with the widest possible reference to Dickens's work, and the comedy is therefore included in a wider reference. The comedy of the later novels is consciously discussed to a lesser extent because the reviewers often do not think that Dickens's works are as comic as they were. There is much talk of a decline in his comedy and the old Pickwickian days are mourned and Dickens's comic grotesque is merely dismissed as grotesque. The comic aspects are not discussed because they are not felt to be as funny. His satire is discussed, but its comic nature is often lost sight of. The balance is tipped in favour of the early Dickens, and it is never redressed in the rest of the period. Hutton says, in the Spectator (18 June 1870, p.751), that it is "as a humourist alone, that

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[60] See below, p.313.

Dickens will be immortal," and he finds that the novels up to David Copperfield are the best because they are the most humorous. The emphasis of Hamley on Pickwickian fun, in Blackwood's Magazine (April 1857), and less charitable comments in the unfriendly reviews, that fun is all that Dickens is good for, reinforce the idea of him as above all a comic writer. The usual term is "humorist," but Hutton's discussions often use the word in a wider sense, and are a strong force in ensuring that Dickens's reputation for comedy is carried over into the next period.

The Generation After Dickens : 1871 - 1906

After the ten years of this period had passed, St John Topp, in the Melbourne Review (July 1881, p.274),summarises the state of opinion on the truthfulness to human nature of Dickens's characters. The debate, he says, is between those on one side who see them as unnatural monstrosities and those on the other who claim that they are such as may be met with in real life. He suggests that the truth lies between these extremes, that some characters are true to life, while others are unnatural, and yet others display mingled truthfulness and untruthfulness. This general pattern is observable in earlier periods,and to an extent that it holds true of this, but the middle ground, in which Dickens's faults are admitted and his excellences concentrated upon, becomes more populous.

In one way, this period begins badly for Dickens's reputation because there is a concerted attack on it in several journals. The alleged lack of truthfulness in his works forms one of the central complaints. Perhaps the harshest of these attacks appears in the London Quarterly Review (January 1871), a Methodist journal which especially objects to his moral influence. The charge of caricature is made as a three-pronged assault on his work. It is low comedy - a question of stature - it is

untruthful, and it does not inspire love, but rather a feeling more akin to contempt, for the exaggerated characters.[61] The characters are the products of "acute" but rarely "profound" observation, and Dickens is given credit for vividness (p.268), but his caricatures are said (p.276) to be "modifications of fact, which but seldom come under the head of idealisations." Not surprisingly, in view of the journal's religious affiliation, Mr. Chadband is singled out for special condemnation, and the reviewer says (p.277), "Let any man search the dismal outskirts of Christianity for the foundation of this personage, and where will he find it?" But even where his religious standpoint does not affect his judgement, the critic finds that Dickens's characters are nottrue tolife except only in a superficial way. A similarly harsh criticism comes also from the Dublin Review (April 1871), a journal whichappealed to educated upper-class Roman Catholics. The article is a long comparison of Dickens and Thackeray, mostly to the latter's advantage because he paints truthfully and with insight whereas Dickens is said (pp.324-25) to be merely a caricaturist. As such, Dickens is fit only for amusing his readers, and the critic praises (p.332) such "harmless old ladies" as Mrs. Nickleby, Miss La Creevy, Mrs. Blimber and others because although "they are not like life," they are "very amusing." When the critic says, however, that "every one of them has become a reality to us, and we like them," he is granting to Dickens mere vividness of characterisation, and his unwillingness to react otherwise to Dickens's comic characterisation is evident when, praising the characters of the early novels, he says (p.347) that Dickens influences the feelings of readers "at the expense of our common sense." For many reviewers, rational rather than emotional response to fiction is required, and

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[61] See below, pp.177,304 for further discussion of this and the critic's assessment of Dickens's stature.

although caricature may, when it is funny, be accepted - with reservations - as a mere form of amusement, the critic in the Dublin Review does not find anything deeper because he[62] has made a conscious decision not to. Because of the caricatured characters of Little Dorrit and Our Mutual Friend, the reviewer says (p.348), "We do not want to remember them or any of the people in them." The reaction is an upper-class rather than a literary one, as prejudiced as the revealing comment about Barnaby Rudge. Dickens's ignorance of religion and the Catholic Church is mentioned (p.338), and his untruthfulness and caricature are incessantly decried, yet the account of the Gordon riots is said (p.341) to be a "masterly" description of "that disgraceful episode in the history of ignorance, bigotry and folly."

Both of these articles, apart from finding much untruthfulness, note the vividness of Dickens's work. Mere vividness by no means suggests truthfulness, and in fact it is sometimes attributed to him in place of it, but it is linked with Dickens's creative and imaginative powers, and eventually in the period there is a greater respect for his vivid yet truthful inventiveness. The whole question ranges well beyond the confines of the comic, but Dickens's comic imagination is eventually lauded by Chesterton, whose criticism links more strongly to the comic what others had suggested before him. Early in this period, the attribution to Dickens of mere vividness is a means of adverse criticism. Forster (Life, II p.116) says, "There are plenty to tell us" that we know Dickens's characters "by vividness of external observation, rather than by depth of imaginative insight, by tricks of manner and phrase rather than by truth of character, by manifestation outwardly rather than by what lies behind." The main target of this is Lewes, whose

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[62] Possibly "she." Collins (p.551) says the writer may be Frances Cashel Hoey.

article "Dickens in Relation to Criticism," in the Fortnightly Review (February 1872) is countered by a later discussion in Forster's Life (II, pp.267 ff.). Lewes's famous statement (reprint[63] p.59) about the "hallucinative" nature of Dickens's imagination follows on from his assertion that Dickens's imagination is "imperial," while "the other higher faculties" are "singularly deficient" in him. The absence of thought and logic, and the over-abundance of imagination and feeling is a personal criticism to which I shall return later,[64] but Lewes goes on to say (p.61) that this is why Dickens falsifies the real. Because of the vividness of his presentation of characters, their "falsity was unnoticed in the blaze of their illumination." Criticism attempted in vain to show that the characters are not real people but "personified characteristics, caricatures and distortions of human nature." People found them satisfactory though, Lewes explains (pp.62-63) because, "if the scenes and manners were unlike those we were familiar with, the feelings and motives, the joys and griefs" of the characters were "universal, and therefore universally intelligible." Dickens, that is, appeals to his readers' emotions, and because readers do not sufficiently scrutinise their feelings, Dickens is successful even though he us untruthful. Characters such as Mr. Dick, Mantalini and Mr. Micawber - to choose only the comic figures from Lewes's examples (p.65) - contain "only touches of verisimilitude," and they are, for him, errors. Lewes constructs an analogy between Dickens's characters and a painted wooden horse, and suggests (p.62) that they are equally artificial but are brought into the range of readers' sympathies because of their superficial brilliance and by Dickens's power to affect

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63 In Ford and Lane, The Dickens Critics (Cornell, 1961, pp.54-74). All references are to this.

64 See below, p. 250.

his readers' emotions through them.

Lewes's arguments and analogies are recounted with horror by Forster, who notes that neither Taine nor Lewes gives Dickens credit for humour, and goes on to explain (Life, II, p.273) the use of exaggeration by Dickens. Lord Lytton had written to Dickens and asked him whether in a particular passage in one of his works, "the modesties of art were not a little overpassed." and Dickens replied that "it is my infirmity to fancy or perceive relations in things which are not apparent generally" and that he constantly studied to restrain his inventive powers. (It is interesting to note that, in a private letter to a friend and fellow-artist, Dickens is apologetic, the reverse of his demeanour when asserting the truth of his novels in his Prefaces.) Forster says that this perceiving of relations between things which are not apparent generally is one of the exquisite properties of humour - mainly, it seems, because of its moral effects[65] - but it is one which has dangers. Humour, he says, "has in it, is indeed identical with, what ordinary people are apt to call exaggeration," and Dickens sometimes committed "an excess beyond the allowable." A few pages later, he reiterates (p.278) that occasionally humour is Dickens's master and not his servant, in which cases "it reproduced too readily, and carried too far, the grotesque imaginings to which great humorists are prone." Dickens studied hard to confine exaggeration "within legitimate limits," he says, and he quotes (p.279) Dickens's letter to another writer in which he says that in any fiction, although "the truth must be there," the "merit or art in the narrator is the manner of stating the truth." That is, Foster argues on Dickens's behalf, for imaginative fiction and the heightening of truth by art. Those who object to his exaggeration, he says (p.273), assume that the occasional "splendid excess of his genius" is "its integral and essential quality."

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[65] See above, p. 12 and below p. 179.

Without claiming that Forster's ideas are new, it may be said that his expression of them is highly influential in the generation after Dickens's death and that they appear in some form or another in many criticismswhich are favourable to Dickens. But in a way Forster expresses typical Victorian answers to the adverse criticisms, and perhaps the ideas would have remained current anyway. Elsewhere he argues in other ways on the same topic. Discussing Bleak House (Life, II pp.116-17) he says that it is "difficult to say when a peculiarity becomes too grotesque, or an extravagance too farcical,to be within the limits of art," because these things "exist in the world in just the proportions and degree in which genius can discover them." And he goes on to repeat the argument, from his earlier review,[66] that men only have contact with each other by the touching of their extremes, and that therefore "it may very often become necessarily the main business of the novelist to display the salient points, the sharp angles, or the prominences merely" of characters, for readers to be able to know them. Men seldom know their fellows deeply, but only form "rough estimates of character," which, "if we have any truth of perception, are on the whole correct." In an oblique reference probably to George Eliot, Forster says that Dickens never stopped to "expound or discuss his creations, to lay them psychologically bare, to analyse their organisms" and so on, but, he says, "no man could better adjust the outward and visible oddities in a delineation to its inner and unchangeable veracities." Forster, that is, argues in two ways. Firstly, what appears odd and exaggerated may be discovered in the world by a man of genius, and secondly, there is psychological truth underlying many of those characters which have been objected to as oddities. Dickens's characters are true, either directly or indirectly, to life. A further argument for indirect truth appears

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66 See above, p. 91.

in the later passage (Life, II p.274) when he says that the better characters are those which combine "traits vividly true to particular men and women with propensities common to all mankind." This statement forms the basis of what Forster says of the characters in the novels during the next few pages. They are vivid creations of real human types, combinations of realistic bases with creative heightening. He discusses many comic characters, but his defence of Dickens's characterisation has wider application than merely to the comic. For example, he claims (p.277) that the characters of the later novels "will live, as the earlier do, by the subtle quality of genius that makes their doings and sayings just part of those general incentives which pervade all mankind". Forster considers David Copperfield one of the later novels, and he continues, "Who has not had occasion, however priding himself on his unlikeness to Micawber, to think of Micawber, as he reviewed his own experiences?" At all times, Forster argues that Dickens is much more than a comic writer at the same time as he insists that Dickens is primarily a great humorist. This is possible because humour is inextricably linked, in the period, with a degree of truthfulness as well as with certain emotions, attitudes and effects, but as usual there is a tendency to look through the comedy to underlying qualities. Forster is appreciative of the comedy, but in his efforts to justify his friend's work he feels that he has to stress its underlying truthfulness and moral seriousness.

Whether because of Forster's influence or not, similar arguments reappear elsewhere, and the topics he discusses retain their importance throughout the generation after Dickens. There are, for example, those who suggest that Dickens's oddities are descriptions of real life. David Pryde, in his entry on Dickens in the Treasury of Modern Biography (1879, p.425) says that people who criticise the characters for their

unnaturalness fail to realise how many oddities there are in the world. Gissing (1902, p.126) is, like many fin de siècle novelists and critics, aware of the advances in society and education since Dickens's day, and he says of Mr. Dick that lunatics were much commoner in the era in which he was created. And Chesterton (1906, p.20) seems to make a similar criticism when he says that the Dickens world is like life because, like life, it is "incredible and irresponsible." But both Gissing's and Chesterton's treatment of the question of truth is much more complex, and I shall return to them later, although it may be said here that Chesterton's statement is a gesture of defiance against Dickens's adverse critics. He suggests that those who do not understand Dickens fail not only to understand his work and his vision of the world, but fail to understand the world itself.

The most common kind of argument, however, is that in some way Dickens manages to heighten the real through the use of comedy, and critics endlessly point out the underlying truth of his characterisation. Buchanan, in St Paul's Magazine (February 1872, p.14),says that Dickens's "Fools" are "perhaps truer to nature than is generally conceded" by the "critical criterion." The Dickens world is a fairy-tale world, according to Buchanan, but he descries reality beneath the fictional surface. Even the Realist, W.D. Howells, admits this. In Harper's Monthly Magazine (July 1902, p.312), he speaks of Dickens's "often grotesque and extravagant" moral parables and calls his work "a sort of fairy story, with people ostensibly of the actual world for the elves, the gnomes, the kobolds, and all the other impossible little folk." Yet, he says, Dickens was "true to certain needs and hopes of human nature." Howells's sympathies obviously do not lie with Dickens, but it is a tribute to him that he can see past his own strong preferences and appreciate a different kind of art. As long as there is some observable truth to human nature at the base of Dickens's creation he is likely to

draw at least limited praise from late-century critics, especially from those who are not happy with the trends in the fiction of their time. H.D. Traill, for example, in The New Fiction (1897, p.294), says that there is always "genius" even in Dickens's exaggeration, and, in his best work, there is usually "some broadly human vice or foible to sustain it." It is only, Traill says, the "too narrowly local, the too eccentrically individual element which has perished."

Traill raises an old answer to the charge of exaggeration when he discusses (pp.294-95) Mrs. Gamp as a "type." He finds that "beneath her lifeless bizarrerie of externals," Mrs. Gamp is "living still." Although monthly nurses are no more, she is true to permanent human characteristics such as "greed and cunning, vanity and unscrupulousness and gross animalism, and the semi-salacious interest of the lower order of womankind in the reproductive side of life." Less vigorously and certainly less colourfully, others note the same kind of thing. St. John Topp, in the Melbourne Review (July 1881, p.274),says that some of the characters may be recognised as real human types heightened by art. We may,he says, meet "a less brilliant Mrs. Gamp" and observe "Pecksniffian touches" amongst our acquaintances. Many of us have, he claims, known less amusing Micawbers, but still Macawbers in "all essential qualities." Samuel Davey, in Darwin, Carlyle and Dickens (1876, p.125),claims that in real life men see and recognise the Pecksniffs, Micawbers, Swivellers and Nicklebys which Dickens has created. Dickens, he says, is no caricaturist, because he always describes mankind in its essentials, not its externals. A.W. Ward, in Charles Dickens (1882, pp.216-17), praises at length the underlying truth of characters such as Dombey, Micawber, Pecksniff, Chadband, and a little later (pp.219-20),he says that many of the characters illustrate the "life and ways" of particular classes, professions or other divisions of mankind.

Likewise, Marzials, in Charles Dickens (1887, p.59), points out the way in which "characters of the keenest individuality" are used to "sum up a whole class." This argument, that the characters are types, answers the objection that they are unreal and retains a sense of the artistic heightening and variety of the comic artist's achievement. However, after the 1880s it does not seem to appear except very occasionally, and Griffin, in the Irish Monthly (October 1896, p.542), perhaps explains why. He does not like the creation of types because it suggests an absence of analysis of character. Such characters are fixed illustrations of characteristics and do not develop but "remain the same to the end." Pro-Dickensians are therefore more apt to celebrate the heightening powers of his comic imagination and the vividness of his creation. Gissing (1902, p.265) defends some of the characters as types - Hugo uses the method too, he says - but he does so in conscious opposition to "the critic who dismisses Dickens's figures as types."

T.S Omond, in The Romantic Triumph (1900, p.113), says that those who "cannot read Dickens" fail to pierce through his "deficiencies of presentment" to the reality beneath, but he values the heightening as well as the heightened, for he says later (pp.115-16) that the comic characters are "more living than real life, more actual than life itself. Imagination transcends reality." This pays tribute to the vividness of Dickens's art and recognises a quality in it which few were willing to decry, although some were willing to deny that Dickens makes the best use of it. One term for the imaginative transcending of the real is, as in earlier periods, "idealism," and like earlier critics, many later critics are happier when the basis of reality is solid and sure. It is not just for the adverse critics that caricature, extravagance and the grotesque are derogatory terms. Forster believes that Dickens occasionally errs in this way, and so does Topp, in the Melbourne Review

(July 1881, p.274), who finds that Quilp, Squeers and Uriah Heep are "unnatural monsters." Much of the hostile opposition to Dickens is from critics who are sympathetic to Realism and Naturalism, but there is also some dissatisfaction with these sometimes unpleasantly truthful modes. Harrison, in Forum (January 1895, p.547), for example, says "Dickens is a realist in that he probes the gloomiest recesses and faces the most disheartening problems of life," but his "idealism" saves his work from Harrison's contempt, and he praises Dickens because "he never presents us the common or the vile with mere commonplace or repulsiveness, and without some ray of humane and genial charm.[67]" A similar preference, for the tactful Dickens over the distasteful Dandet, is expressed by A.E. Street, in the Cornhill Magazine (October 1891, p.400). In an age in which Realism seems to triumph over Dickens's romantic art, the Realists are sometimes forced to defend themselves. Howells complains, in Harper's Monthly Magazine (December 1887, reprint[68] pp.124-25), that "the young writer who attempts to report the phrase and carriage of every-day life" is asked to "idealize his personages" after the manner of Shakespeare or Dickens. That is, Howells says, he is asked to "take the life-likeness out of them, and put the literary-likeness into them." In the same journal fifteen years later, he says (July 1902, p.311) that in Dickens's day "imagination of the kind that bodies-forth the known was a thing not understood at all." Howells is, in these articles, unfair to both Dickens's and his own period, and what in fact is the case is that while earlier there was a demand for greater realism, in the period in which Realism triumphs there is, in some places, a demand for more art.

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[67] See also Davey (1876, p.151) and Ward (1882, p.217).

[68] W.D. Howells as Critic, ed. E.H. Cady (1973)

Initially at least, however, the demand for realism continues. Lewes blames Dickens for an over-use of imagination, and his criticism is echoed long after his article first appeared. In the same journal, Mowbray Morris retains a Coleridgean distinction between fancy and imagination - lost sight of in many criticisms[69] - when he says (Fortnightly Review December 1882, Collins pp.608-9), that in most of his novels, Dickens's fancy predominates. Only in David Copperfield he claims, does Dickens manage to avoid the grotesque and to create imaginative rather than fanciful fiction. Of the characters of the novels, he complains that "nearly all, indeed, of the comic ones, real as he has made them to us, are not, when we come to examine them, realities, but rather conceptions of his fancy, which he has to shape into realities by the use of certain traits and peculiaritiesof humanity with which his extraordinary observation has supplied him." Thackeray "idealises" his characters from reality, but Dickens merely uses his fancy to make unreal beings vivid to the reader. What amounts almost to a distrust of the imagination is present in many criticisms. A.G. L'Estrange, in his History of English Humour (vol. 2, 1878, p.235), notes the tendency to caricature, and says that Dickens is not afraid to leave it to his readers to "deduct the discount[70]" from his excess. Yet his humour is most admirable, L'Estrange says (p.237), when he controls the flight of his fancy, and he adds (p.239) that the humour becomes weak when Dickens relies too much on imagination and too little on reality. Ward (1882, p.219) complains that Dickens too often approaches the grotesque and feels that his art was "not without certain affinities" for the "purely imaginative romance." All through his study, Ward points

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69 See, however, Alice Meynell's "Charles Dickens as a Writer," in the Pall Mall Gazette (18 January 1899, p.3).

70 cf. Whipple, above p. 62 and Williams above p.89.

out, almost ad nauseam, where Dickens is and is not true to life, and when he enters doubtful ground such as the grotesque. Quilp, he says (p.44), is Dickens's most successful attempt at the grotesque, a mode that "was full of danger for him, as it is for all writers;" and Tom Pinch surprises Ward because, while he approaches the grotesque, he is found (p.56) to be "so charmingly true to nature." He recognises that comedy itself has its excesses, but he feels (p.219) that Dickens "at times makes his characters more laughable than nature." In his idea that Dickens creates types, mentioned above, he seems to prefer fiction in which he can pierce the artistic heightening to the reality beneath, and this is reinforced by what he says about Dickens's idealism. Dickens, according to Ward (p.208), "found the ideal in the real and drew his inspirations from the real world around him." To feel his strength, he claims, Dickens "needed to touch the earth with his feet," and he adds later (p.215) that the kinds of characters Dickens "chiefly delights in reproducing are . . . those which most of us have opportunities enough of comparing with the realities around us." This test, he claims, was the test Dickens demanded. Whether this is true or not, it is certainly true that many of his critics demanded it.

James Oliphant says, in Victorian Novelists (1899, p.34), that every novelist ought to be both a realist and an idealist in one, but in Dickens he finds "an unhappy alternation." At times he merely represents particular institutions, for example, and Oliphant says that this is "no praiseworthy realism" because the real is not heightened. On the other hand, especially in his plots, Dickens is at times "wildly imaginative," and Oliphant says that this is "no praiseworthy idealism." It is truth to human nature, however, that seems to count most, and in summing up, Oliphant asserts (p.47) that Dickens did little to deepen the hold of the novel on "the realities of human character."

The kind of balance that Oliphant cannot find in Dickens appears to be found by Cross (1899, pp.187-88). He calls Dickens an idealist because he gives the impression that "this is the best of all possible worlds," and he goes on to say (p.189)that his humour is " a most delightful manifestation" of his idealism. Yet where there is satire and humour there is "if not reality itself, a sense of reality." Events and characters must touch the real at some points because "the region where humor dwells is somewhere between the real and the ideal; in an imaginative treatment of real life." Only "the out-and-out romancers and the out-and-out naturalists" have no humour, he says (p.190), and although there is a basis of the real in Dickens's work, both in treatment of fact and in characterisation, "the essence of Dickens's art is grotesque exaggeration" (p.191). Many of the characters, he claims (p.192), are "humors highly idealized, and yet retaining so much of the real that we recognize in them some disposition of ourselves and of the men and women we meet." Cross's discussion is largely sensible. Despite the fact that he seeks realism, he is not disappointed because he does not always find it, but accepts Dickens's imaginative - even grotesque - art for what it is. His discussion ranges beyond the concern for the relationship between realism and idealism, however, and earlier (p.184) he says of the satires in the novels, that even though Dickens is ignorant of much that was done early in Victoria's reign, it is necessary to grant him "greater freedom in dealing with facts than we are called upon to grant to any other modern novelist of the first order; greater freedom, it is often maintained, than art can reasonably expect." Cross is sympathetic to realism and the demand for truth to the facts - he mentions Bagehot's 1858 objection[71] that many of the evils Dickens attacks are the natural results of present society - but he resists the temptation to condemn, and says (p.185) that Dickens

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[71] See below, p. 164.

seized on imperfections in society and made them the germs of "fantastic" tales as if from the Arabian Nights. He exaggerates, surely, but he creates an artistic picture which is logically completed down to the last detail.

Hutton, in the Spectator (29 July 1893, p.139) also speaks of Dickens's idealism. Characters such as Sam Weller, Mrs. Gamp and Mr. Pecksniff are all artistic perfections of human traits. They are all impossibilities,[72] but they are delightful nonetheless. Sam, for example, is much more loyal to Mr. Pickwick and much more attractive and wise than an education in the streets could have made him, and no hypocrite "was ever so ideally hypocritical even to himself as Mr. Pecksniff." The truth is there, but it is so heightened as to have become an impossibility, and Hutton delights in the art that heightens rather than the reality that is heightened. Something similar is noted by Harrison, in Forum (January 1895, pp.548-49), who says that caricature is the essence of Dickens's humour, and that characters such as Tony Weller, the Fat Boy, Toots, Traddles, Micawber, Gamp or Mantalini are "never possible," but are in fact always - as they are meant to be, he says - "comic distortions of nature." Harrison recognises this, and he appreciates such exaggerated comic art, but he spends much of his time deciding on whether Dickens is a humorist of the highest class or not.[73]

Lilly (1895) rates Dickens as a humorist lower than Thackeray, Carlyle and George Eliot, but his chapter is interesting because of what he says of the humorist's possession and use of imagination. He draws a distinction (pp.5-6), with Goethe, between passive and active imagination. The man of genius has the latter kind, and he uses it to recreate reality. A fictional character may not be found in the world, but he is

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[72] cf. Chesterton below, p.121 on the ideal as the "impossible."

[73] See below, p. 311.

a "living type," and a "real creation." These two terms indicate a balance held by Lilly between life and art. The humorist holds up a mirror to nature, he says (p.4), and it reflects men and their environment, but the mirror is a "magic mirror of artistic imagination," which means that the real is transcended at the same time as it is reflected.[74] This idea is not new in Dickens-criticism, of course, but Lilly merely gives it more sophisticated expression than it has hitherto had. He goes on to say (p.10) that side by side with the real world there is an ideal world which the novelist paints, so that men can contemplate themselves and their existence heightened from what these are in ordinary life. Men constantly wish to break away from the actual, and hence they read and write fiction. However, all of this is general theory, and in discussing Dickens, Lilly finds that he is a poor artist, but that he possesses a "violent and lurid imagination[75]" (p.17) which makes his characters "live in his pages by the power of his creative genius." But he has no high opinion of Dickens's art partly because he does not create the ideal that is based solidly enough on the real. There is too much caricature and exaggeration.

What he allows Dickens is vividness: his characters are "living types." A similar term is used by R.C. Lehmann, in his article on Dickens in Chambers's Cyclopaedia of English Literature (1903, p.468). He notes the "living strength" which Dickens bestows upon his characters. The "faithful accuracy of genius," he says, is quite different from the "accuracy of the instantaneous photographer." The characters are caricatured, but the externals are true to "inward character." This

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[74] See below, p.115.

[75] See below, pp.250-51.

is similar to Forster's idea,[76] and Lehmann appears to follow Forster in noting the psychological truth as well as the vividness of the characters. But, as Lewes's criticism shows, it is possible to reject Dickens despite his vividness. Mrs. Oliphant had done so, indeed, in her article in Blackwood's Magazine (June 1871, pp.677-78), where she says that Dickens captivates his readers to Sam Weller and Mrs. Gamp - coarse, common figures whose creation requires only a minimal knowledge of a narrow section of life - by the vivifying power of his genius. Like Lewes, Mrs. Oliphant argues that Dickens's vividness is not a good substitute for truthfulness. Yet in the 1890s and around the turn of the century in particular, there are a number of critics who find value in Dickens's art because of its vitality. Lehmann is one, and similar feelings may be found in Dawson's The Makers of English Fiction (1905, p.110) and in W.F. Lord's article in The Nineteenth Century (November 1903, p.780). Because these critics find value in Dickens's art despite its lack of profound truthfulness, they must be mentioned here, but a discussion of their criticisms appears in Chapter Four below.[77]

Gissing (1902) is obviously concerned to show that Dickens's fiction is truthful, and he uses several tactics to evade the charge of caricature. One argument is that some of the odd scenes and characters are true to Dickens's time. He says (p.43), for example, that Sketches by Boz was true to the facts of the 1830s, and (p.13) that "sixty years ago, grotesques and eccentricities were more common than nowadays." Men were not so highly educated and were free to express their individual quirks in a way that late-century men, apparently, are not. But Gissing also subscribes to two ideas common in previous criticism :that the

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[76] See above p.101.

[77] See pp.316,317.

characters are types[78] and that Dickens is an idealist. The Wellers, for example, are "socially representative:" each is a "human type" basically copied from nature. However, Sam and Tony are both "creations strictly humorous," Gissing says (p.203). In humour there is always some light thrown on human nature, some thought suggested,[79] and, he adds (p.204), after discussing the moral and "philosophical" teaching that occurs through the Wellers, that "to survey all [Dickens's] humorous characters would be to repeat, in substance, the same remarks again and again." Some of the "satiric portraitures "discussed in an earlier chapter are also "types." Pumblechook is an "embodiment of dishonesty" with "English traits" remarkably varied from other embodiments in Dickens of the same failing (p.152).

The satire is, however, also characterised in some cases, by a vein of exaggeration. For example, Gissing says (pp.129-30) that a degree of exaggeration gives point to the American scenes in Martin Chuzzlewit. Rather unfairly, Gissing says that early critics had only objected to this element of Dickens's art when it had been a matter of "morals or national character," but not when it was a question of art. Dickens exaggerated, he says (p.131), in "all but every page," and through his exaggerated characters he achieved his triumphs. There are moments of subdued truthfulness, the main example of which is William Dorrit (p.114), but the typical Dickens is the one who exaggerates, and the only real question that can be put about the exaggerated characters, he claims (p.131), is whether they are consistent

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78 Gissing defends Dickens's characters as "types" (see above, p. 105), but he prefers Dickens's vividness and vitality, and elsewhere protests against the lifelessness of "types" in the work of others. See K. Graham, English Criticism of the Novel (1965, pp.87-88).

79 See above, p. 14.

or not. The argument for consistency does not seem to appear very much in the period after Dickens's death, possibly because, with the rise of Realism and Naturalism in the novel, critics become obsessed with fiction's truthfulness to life or nature.

The Realists, however, often described disgusting and odious aspects of society, and even with Gissing, Dickens finds favour because he refines and humours his subject to make it acceptable to the public (p.86). He believes Dickens had to do so for the squeamish Victorian public, but even if he does not agree that Dickens's practice is necessary any longer, he appreciates Dickens's art of softening truth, despite the occasional "misrepresentation of social facts." Dickens's main method is idealism. Mrs. Gamp is the most successful example of this. She is "the sublimation of the essence of Gamp," Gissing says (p.103), and in his discussion of her (pp.102-8), he shows that Dickens describes the truth about her, but omits the most offensive parts and uses his humour to soften what remains. Alice Marwood, in Dombey and Son, is an idealised character, but Gissing finds in her a substitution of falsity for truth rather than a partial omission and softening of it. The difference between the two characters is that one is comic and the other is not: through humour, Dickens could safely look at Mrs. Gamp's repulsiveness without offending anyone, but without its aid in the characterisation of Alice Marwood, he is forced to repress details and to conceal the truth, in order to avoid offending. Caricature, Gissing says (p.154), is not Dickens's method, because caricature "proceeds by a broad and simple method," whereas Dickens's characterisation is complex and subtle. Like Shakespeare, although not on such a high level, he is a "supreme idealist." "Art was art, not nature[80]," he argues (p.86), and Dickens used his idealism most to soften the bitterness of truth.

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[80] A reference to Goethe, used by Masson in 1851 and 1859. Gissing's argument is in many ways like Massons's.

But in his most successful cases, he creates the sublime, as he does in Mrs. Gamp. Gissing does not agree with Dickens - note that he says "art was art, not nature" - and clearly feels that he belongs to a different age with different standards, but he pleads convincingly for understanding of Dickens's art, and he has a solid awareness of the value and function of the comic in the novels.[81] Gissing discusses frequently the truthfulness of Dickens's comedy, although he does not spurn farce because it merely amuses (p.202). He mentions the sublime in connection with Mrs. Gamp and more than once discusses Dickens's idealistic method, but the underlying truthfulness is clearly what he values most.

In essentials, Gissing's position is similar to that of most critics who favour Dickens, but others give more emphasis to the imaginative and creative powers which heighten the real. There is still a feeling that Dickens's art is over-imaginative and lacking in artistic control. Lilly, (1895) speaks (p.4) of the "vision" or "intuition" which a man of genius brings to his representation of the world, but finds that Dickens has too lurid an imagination and fails to give "form" to his works. As a humorist, therefore, he is inferior because all that separates a humorist from any other creative artist is that he treats his subject "playfully." But Lilly seeks an idealism that transcends reality by recreating it[82] into a sublime reflection of itself. This is a high poetic power, and although Lilly does not find it in Dickens, it is clear that, in the terms of the criticism of his work during the period surveyed, the highest praise that can be given to Dickens is that he is a good creative artist who does not merely describe reality but imaginatively transcends it and envisions a world superior to that which is known to the senses.

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81 See below, p. 181 for further discussion of Gissing's ideas.

82 Lang, in the Fortnightly Review (December, 1898, pp.947 ff) speaks briefly of Dickens's power to recreate objects by means of his "vision" of reality.

The imagination creates truth, but it is not merely bound by the actual. There are signs that Dickens is accepted for this power, even if some critics would prefer that he described reality more faithfully. Critics in general realise, however, that Dickens does not simply describe the actual and that his art must be judged by its powers of rising above actuality. Swinburne, in the Quarterly Review (July 1902, p.32) gives Dickens high praise for his imaginative creativity when he says, "To have created Abel Magwitch is to be a god indeed among the creators of deathless men. Pumblechook is actually better and droller and truer to imaginative life than Pecksniff . . . Mr. Jaggers and his clients, Mr. Wemmick and his parent and his bride, are such figures as Shakespeare, when dropping out of poetry, might have created, if his lot had been cast in a later century. Can as much be said for the creatures of any other man or god?" Despite the hyperbole, Swinburne's emphasis is clear. The phrase "truer to imaginative life" is the key to the most valuable emphasis that arises out of the period of Dickens criticism that has been surveyed. At the risk of over-simplifying, the phrase may be said to mean very much the same as the word "ideal," because what is expected of idealism is the creation of an imaginative world. No one denies the importance of the real, but this is a denial of the necessity for strict fidelity. The characters of such fiction are "impossible" because they are not to be found in the world, but they are still recognisably human.

The greatest exponent of this line of argument, and the one who finds most value in the comic "impossibilities" of Dickens, is Chesterton. It is important for Chesterton that Dickens is a creator and not a mere copier of life. Because he creates, he is superior to those who merely copy, and his work will last longer[83] because it will not pass away with

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83 See below, pp. 305-6.

time. At first sight this appears to mean that because no similarity to the real can be found, readers will always be able to react to what was never tied to the local. But Chesterton does find truthfulness in Dickens and in fact his argument for "impossibility" is like the argument for idealism seen elsewhere. He begins (1906, p.20) by saying that in one respect Dickens's art is like life because like life it is incredible and irresponsible. Life is not shaped and it is often surprising and unpredictable, and Dickens copies this aspect of life in his art - he is like life in that he is alive, and his art copies nothing, just as life copies nothing: life creates the rhinoceros and art creates Mr. Bunsby. Later, he says (p.95) that even the most wildly exaggerated and impossible character may be copied from life, and Dickens may be blamed for caricaturing when he in fact copies from life. This only appears to be an artistic fault because "Nature is as free as air: art is forced to look probable." Indeed, Dickens is most accurate when he is freest to invent. Major Bagstock is, he says (p.141), a "grotesque," but he is " a glowing and glaring exaggeration of a thing we have all seen in life," the jolly fellow who beneath his exterior is a gross "deceiver of mankind." Both of these ideas are not new, and amount to saying that Dickens is at times true to the odd characters in life and that he creates idealised types.[84]

Chesterton seems to have a new approach when he speaks (p.140) of Dickens's "incurable poetic" and "hopelessly non-realistic" character: Dickens could only make his characters probable if he could first make them impossible. Thus the Dombeys, who are non-comic, are unreal, but Stiggins and Mantalini seem real; while in Toots, Chesterton claims (p.142), he came nearer to the psychology of true love than he did in all of his solemn lovers. Crisparkle may exist in the world, but the glory

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[84] cf. Forster, above, p.101.

of Stiggins is, he claims (pp.137-38), that he could not exist anywhere "except in the head of Dickens." In the later novels Dickens became less of a caricaturist, but he became less of a creator. The later works are better novels, while the early ones are farces, but the farces are superior because they are products of the great, creative Dickens. All of this rests on an earlier argument (p.43) that "exaggeration is almost the definition of art - and it is entirely the definition of Dickens's art." Earlier still (p.21), he says, a little more certainly, that "Exaggeration is the definition of art," but Dickens exaggerates a mood of optimism that the moderns do not understand, and he creates something that people do not believe in. Moderns can, he says (pp.22-23), feel a sadness so great that only impossible characters can express it, but Dickens describes a joy that only impossible characters can express. Chesterton uses the word "farce" deliberately because it stresses the comic nature of Dickens's work, whereas "humour" might suggest other things such as truth or sympathy. Modern readers are out of tune with Dickens's farce. They know, Chesterton claims, that "the soul can be so sad as to dream naturally of the blue faces of the corpses of Baudelaire," but they do not know that there is "a point of exhilaration at which one believes in Mr. Wegg." Every train of thought "may end in an ecstasy," and "all roads lead to Elfland." Readers "understand a devout occultism, an evil occultism, a tragic occultism," but a "farcical occultism" is beyond them. Exhilaration is a "mystical fact," and like sorrow, may be infinite: "by simply going on being absurd, a thing can become godlike; there is but one step from the ridiculous to the sublime." Chesterton's terminology changes to suit different passages of his argument, but the words all tend in the same direction - "the impossible," "Elfland," "the occult," "the sublime," "the godlike" all speak of a higher stratum of existence, just as "the ideal" - the term used by most others - does. Dickens made errors,

Chesterton admits, but in his most successful creations he achieves a kind of comic idealism or comic sublime which is equally as valid as any of the more usual forms which readers accept in the works of others.

Chesterton's ideas can be traced back to those of others, but in his insistence on the importance of the comic in Dickens, and in his claims for the importance of his comedy as a literary achievement, Chesterton finds most value in Dickens where few others were willing to find it, and is the first to rescue his comedy from the second-class status it had hitherto enjoyed in many criticisms. Forster and Hutton had placed his humour on a high level, but Chesterton accepts farce and exaggerated characterisation deliberately in order to emphasise the comic rather than the humane, loving, cheerful aspects of humour which others celebrate. The comic leads to the poetic, and to a very high stature.

Conclusion

That fiction should represent life as it is and accurately portray human nature is expected by numerous critics throughout the period surveyed. Truth to human nature is, indeed, the most important demand. Circumstances and events may be varied by the novelist, although it is expected that they should still be possible, but there is a great interest in character, and many of the discussions mentioned above are concerned with Dickens's portrayal of human nature. That his characters should be truthful in some degree is a demand central to critical discussion, but the degree of truthfulness required varies. At worst, Dickens is said to create caricatures which are completely unnatural, but most adverse critics would allow him a small degree of truth and relegate him to a low stature as an artist because there is too much caricature in his work. The term "caricature" also suggests superficiality, and

Dickens is accused of being too much concerned with externals, and of either not being able or not bothering to delve deeper into nature. Fiction is judged insofar as it may be verified by experience, and because characters such as Dickens creates are not often seen in the world, his art is felt to be inferior to that of the great painters of humanity.

But the appeal to experience leads to different results from different critics, and there are many who claim that Dickens's characters are the same or are similar to real people. The objections and defences are made not solely with reference to the comic, but not only is Dickens's comedy one of the main causes of offence, it is also a means of his salvation, although there is often scarcely an awareness that the critics realise they are discussing comedy. Characters comic and non-comic are attacked and defended in the same terms, and although some of the defences may be applied specifically to the comic, specification is not always made. The most common form of defence is that Dickens's comic characterisation involves a degree of heightening of the real. This is bound up with an emphasis on art and imagination in some critical discussions,but elsewhere the basis of reality that underlies the artistic or imaginative heightening is stressed. On the one hand, the characters are human types, true to essential human traits, psychologically right and heightened just enough to create art but not to lose sight of reality. But some critics lay more value on the heightening and praise Dickens as an imaginative and creative artist. The real is not lost sight of, even in the highest form of heightening, idealism. The artist transcends nature, but he creates characters and a world that at once reflects and perfects the world of reality. The majority of critics who feel a desire to reconcile life and art, do so through an argument which leads to some kind of idealism. Even Chesterton, who speaks of

"impossibility" instead of "the ideal" and who praises Dickens as a godlike creator, seems to have a lot of regard for the artist who re-creates reality through art. There is increasing emphasis on the imaginative qualities of Dickens's work, despite doubts about the quality of Dickens's imagination; and despite the doubters, there is increasing respect for the vividness and vitality of Dickens's characters, especially in contrast to some of the colourless and lifeless characters of the Realists. But the charge of caricature and exaggeration goes on, and Chesterton finds it as necessary to defend Dickens in 1906 as Poe had found it in 1841. At the lowest level, he could be branded as an over-imaginative farceur, and at the highest he could be seen as a poet.

As a satirist, Dickens probably did most to alienate certain reviewers, and he helped create the impression among them that he was irrational and ignorant. Satire which was in tune with the thinking of most sections of the public was acclaimed for its truthfulness and few questioned the novelist's right to treat of subjects of public interest. Perhaps novel-theory had developed by the 1850s and some critics were more concerned about art than about the novelist's teaching, but more importantly, it seems, Dickens offended more people with his later satires and his practice came to be questioned as a result of his giving offence. But at the same time there grew feelings that the novel should not be expected to treat fully and fairly of the facts and arguments; that in fact some degree of poetic licence should be allowed. Partial truths may be all that the satirist needs, and exaggeration may be part of his strategy.

Because Dickens's satires touched on some important issues, and because the critics and some of the journals they wrote for had strong standpoints on those issues, the acceptance of exaggeration and partial

truths in satire is not widespread. The acceptance of exaggeration and partial truths in the humorist is more widespread because the humorist is felt not to over-exaggerate, as opposed to the farceur, and not to have a motive for distorting the truth, as it is feared that the satirist may have. Humour becomes popular partly because of its sentimental associations but increasingly because it is seen as a truthful comic mode, which makes it superior to the other modes. But still, humour involves some degree of exaggeration, and the amount of humour in Dickens is greater than the amount found in the world and he is so far untruthful to the world. Moreover, as a satirist, and as a creator of farce, burlesque and the grotesque, he is even more untruthful, according to some of the critics. Even those who claim that he is more imaginative and artistic than the sober describers of life, and who claim the method of idealism for him, often do not place him on a truly high level. He is still a comic writer and therefore naturally prone to a degree of distortion; and the question remains whether a comic writer is a "serious" writer.

In general, the concern for truth means that not enough attention is paid to the comic, but if some latitude is allowed the critics who seem to have included the comic in much of what they say, it is clear that there are many persuasive attempts to reconcile comic fiction and life. Another method of proving that fiction does its duty by life and of showing that comic fiction is "serious" is to see the comic novelist as a teacher of worthwhile lessons. This and other kinds of arguments will be considered in the next chapter.

THE USES OF COMEDY

Introduction

According to John Tinnon Taylor,[1] the standard preface to an eighteenth century novel contained a protestation of moral aim. He says[2] that the practice of judging fiction by its moral content had decreased by 1830, but interest in the novel's moral effects on readers is apparent long after the beginning of Dickens's career, and if some late -century novelists and critics object to Dicken's concern for moral effect,[3] the tendency to consider the novelist's teaching is widespread throughout the period. Perhaps the emphasis on morality weakens, but even if more intellectual and philosophically-minded critics later in the century ridicule Dickens, their approach remains the same: they look at his novels for enlightenment about life and the living of it.

Comedy in literature most obviously may have simple effects. The comic writer aims to amuse and frequently causes laughter in his reader. In farce, that may be the only aim and effect, but the comic writer may have more weighty purposes. Dickens certainly did, and his readers and critics expected it of him. His didactic intentions are not solely expressed by means of his comedy, but they are often combined with it. The most didactic comic method is satire, but the typical descriptions of humour surveyed above[4] show that moral, emotional and sentimental elements are both discovered and expected in it, whether "humour" is meant as a specific comic mode or not.

Victorian critics are preoccupied with how readers respond, and, writing for the same audience that Dickens did, they frequently work to

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1 op.cit., p.88.

2 p.98

3 See Gissing (1902, p.74)

4 See pp. 4-19.

point out his moral meaning, to reinforce his pleas for the abolition of abuses, and to point out generally the significance of his art. Equally, if they disagree with him, they are likely to spend a lot of their time pointing out his errors and arguing against his political opinions. Comedy may, therefore, express opinions and seek effects which may be sought or expressed equally by non-comic means. The frequency with which the ends of comic fiction rather than the comic means themselves are discussed shows how seriously Dickens's comic art is taken by his reviewers.

On the other hand, there are those who say that the comic writer can have or ought to have nothing important to say: his business is, or ought to be, to amuse the public. Dickens is attacked either for being too funny or for not being funny enough. There are attempts to reconcile his serious purposes with his comic expression of them, but it is remarkable how often his seriousness is dwelt upon while attention is being paid to his comedy. This is, of course, quite natural to a degree: comic fiction is not merely laughable and amusing, and non-comic modes are often combined with it. But there are strong feelings, especially early in the period under survey, that anything approaching frivolity must be either condemned or, if possible, shown not to be frivolous. Dickens's reputation suffers because some of his work is merely farcical and high-spirited and for a long time his supporters may be seen to be defending him against the charge of being a mere "funster." His "untruthfulness" often leads his adverse critics to dub him as such, but often they do so because he appears not to have a serious purpose.

Admiration for his moral teaching or his education of the heart survives in some form or another throughout the period, but from the 1860s onwards in particular, there are greater demands for intellectual and philosophical content in fiction, and it is assumed by many that he has nothing worthwhile to offer his readers in this way. Either in

a condescending tone or in genuine admiration, he is praised, however, for teaching his readers to look on the sunny side of life and for generally cheering them up. This is a refurbishment of calling him a funster, and it causes later critics to reemphasise his more solid moral and practical effects, and to seek some kind of philosophy in his works. The best of these attempts is made by Chesterton, but there remains a feeling that most consolation is found, still, in Dickens's cheerfulness or in some kind of imaginative satisfaction which Dickens's novels are still felt to offer.

It is difficult in this area, to separate comments on the comic from discussions of the non-comic because the aim of many of the discussions is to show that the comedy satisfies "serious" concerns. What needs to be shown in many cases is an awareness of the comic in the reviewers' statements, and a reconciliation of solemn impulses with the comic materials they find themselves discussing.

The Early Reaction: 1836 - 1842

In early reviews, there is much uninhibited and fairly simple acceptance of Dickens's comedy. Reviewers of Pickwick Papers and Nicholas Nickleby in particular are struck by the hilarity of the comedy, but from the beginning some of them are aware that there is more than just hilarity in it, and that Dickens is more than a mere comic writer. Dickens himself demonstrates this in his social concerns in Oliver Twist, in the pathetic scenes of The Old Curiosity Shop, and in parts of all of his early novels, but he still gains a reputation as a comic writer, and rather than dismiss him,his critics seek in his comic passages the kinds of purposes and effects they usually expect of fiction whether it is comic or not. Most of the reactions that will be discussed here involve some kind of qualification of the straightforward response of laughter.

Laughter itself could be useful, of course. The Sunday Herald (21 February 1836, p.62) recommends Sketches by Boz as a cure for the "blue devils", and Boz's power to afford mere amusement is frequently praised. The appearance of a new source of amusement - whether therapeutic or not - is welcomed by many reviewers. But the kind of criticism reserved by some for that which had no higher aim is illustrated by The Mirror (16 April 1836, p.249) which says that Sketches by Boz "can only be said to amuse without any higher effect.[5] This is to be regretted; because sketches such as Boz can write may be pointed with a moral, and made the vehicle of some excellent instruction, and improvement of the heart." Few early reviewers would have agreed with the Mirror, even about Sketches by Boz. The comments of the New Moral World[6] show that even the earliest of Dickens's fictions may be seen as the vehicle of heavy politico-moral instruction, and comments on the other novels show how solemnly they are at times discussed.

There are, however, those who predict distasteful results from Dickens's comic fiction. The fastidious Richard Ford, in the Quarterly Review (June 1839, p.92) objects to the "undeniable drollery" of some of the characters in Oliver Twist who are not only "outcasts of humanity," but also speak slang language and offer other poor examples of conduct to young and especially female readers. He continues later (p.97) to say that the tendency of such novels is to familiarise the rising generation with the haunts, deeds, language, and characters of the very dregs of the community." The Eclectic Review (April 1837, pp.353-54), reviewing part of Pickwick Papers, objects to "some few instances of profanity which we could readily dispense with," and says that in Pickwick Papers there are "some jokes, incidents, and allusions,

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[5] This is a matter of stature. See below, p.265.

[6] See below, p. 130.

which could hardly be read by a modest woman without blushing." The reviewer's modesty, of course, prevents our being told which these are, but he also protests against the satire of religious hypocrisy in the person of Stiggins. Such "making sport of fanaticism and hypocrisy" is dangerous, he says, because "such matters are far too serious for sport" and because often "readers who know little or nothing of what true religion means, are easily tempted to apply to every thing which bears its impress, the name of cant, hypocrisy, and fanaticism." And later, the United States Magazine and Democratic Review (April 1842[7]) says of Dickens's morally bad characters - the examples given include Quilp, Noah Claypole and Sampson Brass - that there are "no such characters in human life or human nature; and the moral effect of exhibiting such to the imagination is very bad, and a serious drawback on the useful influences of the rest of his writings." This comment shows the close link between the concern for truth and that for effect, but the problem usually only arises with evil characters because impossible characters whose effect is potentially for good are rarely a cause for concern. Fiction is expected to offer good examples to impressionable readers, or at least not to delude them into mistaken beliefs or immoral actions. Some reviewers feel that literary taste may be degraded by fiction which contains vulgar or common scenes and characters. The word "vulgar" often has both senses: "concerning the common people" and "distasteful" or "low." Often much of the argument around these questions lies outside the present discussion of the reaction to Dickens's comedy, but since the effects of comic scenes and characters - many of which are "vulgar" in the neutral sense of the word - are discussed, the answers to these objections must be considered to some extent.

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7 repr. Dickensian (September 1907, pp.229-233). The comment quoted is on p.232.

In the Edinburgh Review (October 1838, p.77) Lister says, in opposition to the kind of adversely critical viewpoint mentioned above, that "The reader is led through scenes of poverty and crime, and all the characters are made to discourse in the appropriate language of their respective classes - and yet we recollect no passage which ought to cause pain to the most sensitive delicacy, if read aloud in female society." And Lewes, in the National Magazine and Monthly Critic (December 1837, Collins p.67), speaking of the same novel - Oliver Twist - says that although Dickens "gives us the language of vagabond, thief, footman, ostler, and gentleman" most accurately, there is yet "not a single coarse word, or one allusion that could call a blush into the cheek of the most fastidious." Without reference to "the cheek of the young person ," as Mr. Podsnap might put it, the Court Magazine (April 1837, Collins p.35) says that Dickens gives "the spirit, but not the letter of slang," so that the reader may "enjoy the broad drollery, released from all its repulsive associations,[8]" and the Examiner (27 October 1839, Collins p.48) adds that because Dickens directs his readers' sympathies towards their fellowmen, it is impossible to "associate anything that is vulgar or low with his treatment of subjects that in themselves are avowedly so."[9] (Dickens himself laughs at the kind of critical opinion which the Examiner here rebuts, in his ironical heading to Nicholas Nickleby, Chapter Fourteen - "Having the Misfortune to treat of none but Common People, is necessarily of a Mean and Vulgar Character.)"

The Examiner mentions one of the central defences of Dickens during the period under survey: he encourages sympathy for his fellowmen. In

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[8] This is personal praise for Dickens, too. See below, p.202.

[9] Such comments are often intended to mark Dickens's work off from the disliked Newgate fiction. For this, see the Athenaeum (26 October 1839, p.803) and the London University Magazine (I, 1842, pp.381-83).

the National Magazine and Monthly Critic (December 1837, Collins pp.66-67), Lewes says that Dickens throws charm over all of the characters in his work and makes the reader love them in spite of himself. The two Wellers and Mr. Wardle "gain every one's good word," and even Jingle "shows many of the better points of our nature." Hood, in the Athenaeum (7 November 1840, Collins p.98),praises Dickens for his sympathy with humanity and for his ability to make his readers in a better humour with the world, and adds, "It has been said that one-half of the world does not know how the other half lives; an ignorance, by the way, which Boz has essentially helped to enlighten: it is quite as certain that one-half of London is not aware of even the topographical existence of the other." Before saying that characters like Quilp do not exist, he suggests, it would be best to check his haunts,[10] but Hood believes that Dickens has revealed certain truths about aspects of society to comfortable classes who may not have been aware of them. The Spectator (31 March 1838, p.304), however, says that Dickens's work affects lower class people more. He has, the reviewer says, "much of the most electric spirit for operating on the vulgar, where no appeal can be made to their interests or their prejudices - the real spirit of humanity, which spoke in Terence's Homo sum; nil humanum a me alienum puto.[11]". In the Edinburgh Review (October 1838, p.77), Lister also praises Dickens's "comprehensive spirit of humanity." He adds, "The tendency of his writings is to make us practically benevolent - to excite our sympathy in behalf of the aggrieved and suffering in all classes." Such comments have little to do with the comic, but some reviewers who begin by noticing the comic do little more than notice it. For example the writer in the New Moral

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10 See above, p. 52.

11 I am a man; I consider nothing human indifferent to me.

World (18 July 1840, pp.34-35) sees the "highly humorous" characters in Sketches by Boz as representatives of the suffering classes of society and urges his readers not merely to read the book as a source of amusement, but as a "treatise illustrative of the truest philosophy." Although readers might wish that such delightful characters should continue to exist and to "furnish subjects for drollery," such laughter is felt to be "only in a trifling degree better than that vulgar merriment which is awakened by the sight of deformity." The danger inherent in many Victorian comments on the usefulness of Dickens's comic fiction is in evidence here: the reviewer's zeal for reform - prompted in this case by Socialist sympathies - places the comedy in danger of being totally lost to sight. Something similar may be observed in Fraser's Magazine (April 1840, Collins p.90). The reviewer says that Dickens "has one great merit independent[12] of his undoubted powers of drollery, observation, and caricature, - he has not lent his pen to anything that can give countenance to vice or degradation; and he has always espoused the cause of the humble, the persecuted, and the oppressed." The comedy of the novels is sometimes, it seems, viewed as an exterior covering beneath which serious concerns are contained, and having removed the covering, critics sometimes merely toss it aside.

One means of creating a balance between the comic and the serious is to see comedy as inherently a serious mode. If love for mankind is the keynote of Dickens's humour, this is seen to be natural to the humorist. The Christian Examiner (November 1839, p.171) says, in a review of Oliver Twist, "There is a comic side to everything. And there is a fondness for this side of things which is not heartless . . . Indeed, the perfection of humor, and the most of it, will be found in the most earnest and loving souls. And in them it exists in intimate

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12 The emphasis here is mine.

connexion with the pathetic."[13] Humour, pathos, love and sympathy are all felt to be very close to each other, and Dickens's humanity, which at first sight may not seem to have much to do with the comic, often has much to do with it because of this kind of linking. Forster, in the Examiner (4 December 1841, p.722) speaks of the tenderness and benevolence of the humour in The Old Curiosity Shop, the novel which most satisfied public demand for the mixture of humour, pathos and love, and no doubt helped increase the demand.

If, when the readers' and critics' emotions are aroused, the comic seems to be engulfed in sentimentality, a balance between comedy and seriousness is sometimes kept in comments on the early satires. Such a balance perhaps exists in Richard Ford's comments in the Quarterly Review (June 1839, p.93) that "Buzfuz and tomata-sauce are a fair exposition of the brow-beating system of our courts of justice; the verdict does honour to trial by jury. Nickleby is aimed, primarily, at those cheap seminaries where starvation is taught gratis, and . . . we rejoice to hear that the exposure has put down many infant bastilles." Earlier, in a similar tone, the Metropolitan Magazine (January 1837, Collins p.31) seems to retain a sense of the comic when it says of Mr. Pickwick that he is "the legitimate successor to Don Quixote" and, "instead of armour of iron, he is encased in a good coating of aldermanic fur, and instead of spear and sword, has his own powers of declamation with which to go forth and do fearful battle upon the swindler, the wrong-doer, and the oppressor of the innocent." And the Dublin University Magazine (December 1838, p.701) perhaps retains a sense of the comic when it says, ironically, that the actions of Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Mann in Oliver Twist "will, we have little doubt, be found most

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[13] Quoted above, p. 8 and mentioned below, pp.201-2.

serviceable, not only to those of our readers to whose ambition our New Poor Law is about to open up the new and honourable career of guardians to the poor, but also to all professors of political economy and others . . . who may be troubled with anticipations of evil from the contingency of an overgrown population." Perhaps the comedy of Dickens prompts the half-jocular tone of the reviewer, but the reviewer's tone is as likely caused by a satirical impulse in himself as by an appreciation of Dickens's.

Perhaps too, other reviewers, in treating Dickens's comedy - especially his satire - in so solemn a tone, had noted what the reviewer in the London University Magazine (I, 1842 p.379) notices, that Dickens's tone changes in the latter part of Pickwick Papers, in Nicholas Nickleby and in Oliver Twist. Earlier there had been "many a quiet hint on every-day duties," and "many a sly blow . . . at narrow-minded prejudices and foolish habits," he claims, but in more recent works there are "grave lessons" delivered in a "higher tone:" "Here they come in the shape of direct attacks on definite and tangible abuses, as in the account of Dotheboys-Hall, and the history of Oliver's early life as a parish-boy; and in vividly truthful pictures of the terrible and degrading consequences of avaricious or sensual selfishness, or weak-minded want of principle, as instanced in the characters of Ralph Nickleby, Sir Mulberry Hawk, and Lord Verisopht." One is tempted to ask here what has become of the comedy of the scenes and characters mentioned, and it is a question that often threatens to arise in reading what reviewers say about the satires. It is a little ironic that some later reviewers, unsettled by the harsher tone of Dickens's satire, look back to the easy-going mirth that is associated with his early efforts, while early reviewers sometimes feel the need solemnly to point out the moral lessons involved.

Reviewers have, however, a passion for satire, and it is manifested in their tendency to stress the presence of satire in unusual places.

The Christian Examiner (November 1839, p.172), for example, finds that the Pickwickians are a satire of modern society. He seems to believe that they are typical modern men who show up the ills of modern living and are therefore ultimately tragic rather than comic characters. "Modern society," the reviewer says, "was never more successfully exposed." Lister, in the Edinburgh Review (October 1838, pp.79-80), shows that the novels are ransacked for their relevance to life when he says that Dickens does not merely confine himself to the obvious abuses in everyday life, but "elicits and illustrates absurdities" which are "comparatively unobserved," and he goes on to praise the "Pickwickian sense" episode and the "Chinese Metaphysics" joke.[14] Fraser's Magazine (October 1838, p.500) claims that the "Pickwickian sense" scene has been effective in preventing members of parliament from insulting each other and then claiming that their words were only meant "in a parliamentary sense," and the reviewer notes that in more recent works Dickens has turned his satiric powers to greater account in his descriptions of "the orphan in the workhouse - the exiled child at a Yorkshire school - the poor milliner's slave." He adds that there is little that public sympathy can do in these instances but suggests to Dickens that he might try to do something for young children who are being worked to death in the factories. Such statements give an idea of how readily the satirist was accepted as a public figure, and it was, of course, by his major attacks on abuses that he was known.

Lister, in the Edinburgh Review, adds that Dickens is a satirist "of a sterner kind," and he discusses (pp.80-82) his satires of the administration of English law, and the system of imprisonment for debt, of the latter of which he hopes that "a statute of the past session" will have done much to achieve its abolition. The Literary Gazette (24 November 1838, Collins p.79) is enthusiastic about the satires in which Dickens "has nobly directed his energies to the exposure of evils -

[14] Pickwick Papers, chapters 1 and 51.

the workhouse, the starving school, the factory system, and many other things, at which blessed nature shudders and recoils. As a moralist and reformer of cruel abuses, we have the warmer thanks of the community to offer him." In the face of Lister's eloquence, the question again threatens to rise, whether he noticed the comic nature of the satires. A similarly solemn assessment of the "moral qualities" of the author appears in the Monthly Review's article (January 1839, pp.40-41). Since there is no grand passion or tragic force in the novel, it is naturally on a lower level of achievement than Richardson's and Goldsmith's, but Dickens does not write "for the mere sake of gain, of entertainment, or of merely harmless fiction." He has, we are told, "high and pure aims; nor can he have failed of doing good, morally speaking. See how he identifies himself uniformly with the oppressed; how with his sly yet effective humour he has exposed systematic and institutional abuses, and what is more, how forcibly he shows that the vilest in the population is far more an object of commiseration than of anger." For this reviewer, it seems, indeed, that grand passion and tragic force are a kind of norm to which all other kinds of fiction need to approximate.

Comments about the instructiveness and effectiveness of Dickens's satires vary from those like Lister's and the Monthly Review's to simple pronouncements such as the Literary Gazette's (7 April 1838, p.214) that Dickens's "sarcastic humour" is "ever aimed at the pillorying of folly or the whipping of vice," but after reading so many accounts of the noble and solemn moral effects of Dickens's works, it is almost a relief to come across the simple, and - one trusts - jesting comment, in the Morning Advertiser (25 October 1836), which, mentioning Boz's description of a pie-man, says "Apropos of these, meat pies must now be at a discount according to Boz, for'fruit's in, and cat's is out'."[15] But even such a statement may obliquely reflect on the fact that instruct-

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[15] Pickwick Papers, chapter 19.

ion and, hopefully, action are seen as the desired effects of Dickens's satire. The satirist is felt to be a public spirited man who educates the public sympathies and encourages and expresses the right kinds of emotions. His comic qualities are recognised, and they are celebrated most unrestrainedly in journals like the Morning Advertiser, the Satirist, Bell's Life in London, and so on. But the more sober journals like the Edinburgh Review and the Examiner, and the religious periodicals like the Christian Examiner expect more from literature than mere amusement, and they seek more than mere amusement in the comic, too. While it is good that Dickens is not left as the delight of the popular newspapers, at times there is an over balancing in favour of the solemn.

Amidst all of the considerations of the effects and the lessons of the fiction, there is some rudimentary attention paid to the function of the comedy in the novels. The use of comic relief is noted by the Christian Examiner (November 1839, p.162). In Oliver Twist, the "wretched scenes" describing "the pauper system of England," though "true to the life," are yet relieved by much exquisite humor in the caricature of the petty officials," Bumble and the Board. Ford, in the Quarterly Review (June 1839, p.93), in advising Dickens to keep to his "native vein of the serio-comic," says "He shines in this: his fun sets off his horrors." Yet at times Dickens may be too funny. Lewes, in the National Magazine and Monthly Critic (December 1837, Collins p.68), feels that he at times strains after the humorous, and this "gives a laboured air to the work, besides which, it gives a want of light and shade, which fatigues the mind, if reading too much at a time." What is wanted here is not comic relief, but relief from the comic, and it seems that reviewers find this relief in the morality of the works. It is quite clear, however, that aside from considerations of whether too much comedy can be fatiguing, most reviewers expect something more than

mere amusement from Dickens's fiction, and they are much happier, at this stage of his career, with his satire and his tearful humour than they are with his exuberant comedy.

The Middle Years : 1843 - 1852

Near the end of his review of David Copperfield, in the Examiner (12 December 1850, p.799),Forster says that "every page of the story is a lesson in self-denial, in the patient endurance of unavoidable ills, in strenuous effort against such as are remediable, and in that virtuous aspiration after the pure heart and unselfish will which can alone give true happiness or lasting peace." No author rivals Dickens in creating works which "apart altogether from the amusement and instruction they convey, so uniformly strengthen the generous emotions, so carefully guard the delights and purities of home, teach us increased tolerance and good will free from all tolerance of vice, or contribute so much to each man's means and power of enduring and conquering his fate." One wonders why all this is said to be "apart" from the novel's "instruction," but it is easy to see why it is separated from its "amusement." The tendency to dignify comic art and popular literature by stressing heavily the morality it contains, is evident here, and the kind of attitude with which the comedy is viewed is explained by the strong bias towards finding moral instruction. This bias leads reviewers to find satire - often the most didactic of comic modes - in many places. For example, Forster, in the same review (p.798), says that the depiction of the spend-thrift, impractical Micawbers is "one of the happiest pieces of good-natured social satire conceivable." But to recapture the feeling of immediacy that Dickens's novels created, one needs to turn to the monthly reception of his serial parts, in the newspapers as well as periodicals. For example, both Bell's Life in London (3 March 1850, p.3) and the Weekly Chronicle (9 March 1850, p.6) thank Dickens for his exposure of

the Prerogative Office,in the eleventh Number of David Copperfield. Reform, they say, is overdue and Dickens's exposure of its incompetence, they hope, will bring about the desired effect.[16]

Novelists are regarded as moral teachers whether they wish to fill the role or not. Cleghorn, the the North British Review (May 1845, p.80), having discussed the moral tendencies of Dickens's works already, sets aside a further section of his review for the discussion of them. The able novelist, he says "exercises great power in moulding the feelings and judgment of his readers." R.H. Horne (1844, p.30) feels it necessary to point out any faults that Dickens's novels may have, because they are circulated in great numbers and have a widespread influence. Or, as the English Review (December 1848, p.274) puts it, the responsibilities of the novelist are "enormous." Dickens and Thackeray are both recognised as popular humorists, and the reviewer says,"No two men are capable of exercising a wider influence for good or evil over their fellow-creatures." But, "the weapons in their hands are keen-edged tools; they must cut in one direction; they may cut in both." The right direction is towards moral instruction and the two humorists are counselled to continue to "labour for the correction of abuses, and denounce all pretence and hypocrisy," and, without plunging into the fray of politics, to "promote the spirit of reverence, both for Church and State." This last comment exhibits a natural fear in 1848, the year of widespread revolution in Europe, but the responsibilities of the comic writer are indeed "enormous" if his role stretches to this extent. The English Review links the rise of humour with the development of Christianity,[17] so it is perhaps not surprising that so much is ultimately

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[16] Unfortunately, I have been unable to follow up newspaper reviews of serial parts, and such references as I have, from reviews of David Copperfield mostly, are taken from Don Vann, "David Copperfield and the Reviewers" DA (1968, pp.3159-60A).

[17] See above, p. 10.

claimed for the humorist's powers, but the general moral characteristics and aims seen to be typical of the humorist by many reviewers, lead naturally away from the mere comic.

This is so because of a continuing fear that comedy may be irresponsible, or may encourage irresponsibility in those who read only to laugh. This is clearly pointed out by Felton, in the North American Review (January 1843, Collins pp.130-31), who sees the need to dignify Dickens's comic art and to lead readers away from regarding Dickens as being "chiefly to be praised for wit and humour."[18] Felton says, "Dickens is an original poet. Many of his characters are drawn with earnestness and enthusiasm. He has sounded the depths of the human heart, as well as skimmed over its surface." And Felton goes on to speak of his "practical moral aim" (Collins p.132), his love for humanity and his sympathy with "the great philanthropic movements which mark the present age." Usually, however, "fun" is the comic mode which is said to amuse, whereas "humour" means something deeper. Horne (1844, p.61) says, of the conversation between Snawley and Squeers on the subject of Providence,[19] "Let no lover of fun suppose that the ludicrous circumstances of this dialogue are merely introduced to produce a laugh at the graphic absurdity: they mark the hypocrisy and the total absence of any real sense of Providence in these two scoundrels." And Fraser's Magazine (December 1850, Collins p.245) agrees. Dickens's "fun is not mere fun. Had it been so, we should have tired of it long ago. Deep truths are hidden, scarcely hidden, beneath." Partly this means that a taste for fun is dignified by the pointing out of serious moral concerns, but also there is a sense that a work that is artistically flawed may be

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[18] This is briefly discussed above, p. 26.

[19] Nicholas Nickleby, Chapter 38.

improved if it is morally uplifting. The Monthly Review (September 1844) accepts Mark Tapley, even though he seems unreal, because he is morally good,[20] and the reviewer adds (p.138) that the author's "moral tendency" in Martin Chuzzlewit as a whole, disarms criticism. The Monitor (1 February 1851, p.29) and The Times (11 June 1851, p.8) both excuse Dickens for his tendency to exaggerate and place him higher than Thackeray because of his tendency to inculcate higher moral lessons than does the occasionally cynical Thackeray. Horne explains this kind of critical emphasis when he says (p.13) that "A few touches of genuine good feeling, of rich humour, and of moral satire, will redeem anything, so far as the high principle, right aim and end of writing are concerned." He notes that the excuse is not really an excuse for art, when he says that a writer needs to be skilled also in other ways, such as the handling of dialect and the creation of striking character, but later (pp.30 ff), he too objects to the likely moral effects of parts of the works, such as the false morality of some of Dickens's heroines, and the impression given in Oliver Twist that justice is vindictive. The latter is apt to mislead readers, and Horne also dislikes the sympathy that is built up for Sykes during his flight from the law. Sykes is a criminal, and the novelist seems to take pity on him as a mere hunted man.

This goes beyond the present concern for the comic, but it shows clearly that the concern for the moral sometimes take precedence over that for art. In religious journals like The Monitor and the English Review, such is to be expected, but elsewhere there is a balance held between the two concerns. Morality is at all times respected, but it is not exclusively pronounced upon and there is some emphasis on art. Most reviewers continue to seek, however, some kind of "teaching" in

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[20] See above, p. 71.

the novel. The Spectator (23 November 1850, p.1119) expresses the general "theory" on this point, when it says, "Any prose fiction that is to take rank in the first class, must have what in epic poetry is called a fable, - some lesson of life embodied in a story that combines the utile and the dulce." Dickens's comedy is often recognised, to use these terms, as an important aspect of the "dulce" of his work, but many reviewers spend most of their time seeking the "utile." Earlier, the Dublin University Magazine (April 1844, p.520) says, in a similar vein, "Let this eminent man continue to instruct and benefit while he delights us. It is thus that fiction may lay claim to be called literature." "Fiction" here retains some of its old derogatory connotations, but if in general the "new" literary genre is beginning to be accepted without much question, it is definitely acceptable when its moral or practical purpose is clearly in view. What seems to have occurred is that comic fiction has become the scapegoat for the moralists who frown on frivolity, just as the novel form itself once was. And the result is, similarly, that purpose, morality, and practical effect are sought to dignify the comedy just as they had been sought in the novel itself by its defenders in the eighteenth century.

Thus W.H. Leeds, reviewing the first two Numbers of Martin Chuzzlewit in the Athenaeum (4 March 1843, p.210), says that in Mr. Pecksniff, Dickens "has opened to himself an opportunity of doing much more than amuse - of exposing the mal-practices which take place at architectural competitions . . . and as he seldom loses sight of a moral purpose, we earnestly hope that the opportunity will not be lost." In fact the vocation Dickens gives to Mr. Pecksniff plays little part in the novel, and when Martin and Mark, on their return from America, observe him laying a foundation stone, the scene seems almost designed to remind us that Pecksniff is supposed to be an architect.[21] The

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[21] Chapter 35. The scene does, of course, serve other purposes.

wider moral significance of Pecksniff is discussed, however, by Forster, in the Examiner (26 October 1844, p.675), who concludes, "Mr. Pecksniff is a public example, and is doing, we have no doubt, great public good." The fear that odious characters may be objected to as encouraging moral degradation in readers is answered by Forster when he says "Mr. Dickens talks of vice, and his readers can but think of virtue." The lesson to be learned from Pecksniff is that "there is nothing but self- help to save us" from the evil that he personifies, and his revelation in fiction should allow readers to define the evil and to avoid the "mistake of Tom Pinch," that "amiable weakness of putting the best face upon the worst things." The Examiner, under the influence of Forster, usually supports Dickens, but there are, in this period, others who are not so satisfied with the novelist's performance.

For some, his moral influence is not good. The American satire is disliked because of its potential effects. Hickson, in the Westminster Review[22] (December 1843, p.457), feels that it may increase "national antipathies," and the Athenaeum (20 July 1844, p.665), guessing that Dickens's satire is a retaliation against American piratical reprints of his work - which would not wish to include an attack on their own country - says, "the point gained was temporary, the injury permanent." But according to Hickson, the distasteful effects of Martin Chuzzlewit are more widespread, because the world of the novel is one of "knaves and fools, destitute of any one quality that could command respect." Dickens was not always like this, but his great creations of the past have been replaced by characters in whom human nature is contemplated "only under an aspect which inspires loathing." Such characters may be

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22 In a particularly anti-American period of English opinion, the Westminster is one of the journals which is consistently pro-American. See H.C. Allen, Conflict and Concord (New York, 1959) p.146.

used by a novelist as foils for "happier delineations," but the picture has, according to Hickson, "no relief." The feeling of unpleasantness that is left in his mind by the comedy of the novel prefigures a similar feeling caused by the later novels.[23]

Improbable characters, as well as distasteful ones, may be objected to because of their potential effects. Thus, Sharpe's London Magazine (May 1848, p.201) objects to the improbable characters of Dombey and Son because when readers cannot sympathise with a character in fiction, the character "ceases to be a beacon for our guidance, or a quicksand to avoid." Samuel Warren, in Blackwood's Magazine (November 1846, p.638) however, fears for the potential effect of Dickens's fiction on "the minds of tens of thousands of young and inexperienced readers who may take all for gospel that he chooses to tell them." Warren seems mainly to be objecting to Dickens's characters, which he thinks are theatrical in the worst sense, and to an air of unreality in the first Number of Dombey and Son , and he distrusts the comedy, because he says that young readers should be "very guarded as to moral object or effect, - if moral object or effect his writings have, and be not intended solely to provoke, by their amusing and farcical absurdity and extravagance, an idle and forgotten laugh." Whether Dickens's comic fiction is merely said to amuse, or whether it does have some "higher" effect, it is, however, likely to be castigated by reviewers. Clearly Warren expects more than mere laughter to result from it, but the Union Magazine (February 1846) dislikes the comic - and more especially the fanciful - elements of the Christmas Books and feels that Dickens is too much preoccupied with his "teaching" to have a care for his art. It says (p.236), "That he does not care what is thought of these Christmas tales as tales, provided the public will allow their sympathies to be enlisted against Alderman Cute and Ebenezer

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[23] See below, p. 152 for example.

Scrooge is very likely; but the rule of justifying the means by the end is as false in literature as in ethics." Most reviewers, however, seem to be more interested in the end rather than the means, and this is especially so when they discuss matters of moral instruction and the satire of the novels.

Cleghorn, in the North British Review (May 1845, p.70), though sensible of the charm of the comedy which surrounds Dick Swiveller, protests, "But we fear that the inimitable Dick is a dangerous character, for his vices are forgotten or even loved in the excessive diversion he affords us." For this reviewer, writing in a strongly evangelical journal, Dick Swiveller is inimitable in two senses of the word. The old argument - noted in the previous section of this chapter[24] - that evil fictional characters may blunt the reader's "perceptions of moral purity" is again raised by Cleghorn. Vice is made the subject of merriment rather than of horror and the potential effects of this on impressionable readers are deplored. Later (p.85), Cleghorn uses an old eighteenth-century anti-novel argument, when he says that publications such as Dickens's may lead readers to dream of unreal worlds and to be unable to concentrate on the business of reality. Here Cleghorn adds a footnote referring to Dr. Arnold's belief that the decline of "manly thoughtfulness" and the increase of "frivolity and childishness" is "owing to the periodical form given to works of amusement" such as Pickwick Papers and Nicholas Nickleby. Not only do such publications seek mainly to amuse, the serial parts appear so often that the routine seriousness of daily life is too frequently interupted for those of such stern moral and practical demeanour as Dr. Arnold and Thomas Cleghorn.

Horne (1844, pp.14-15) takes an opposite stance to Cleghorn's, and he speaks of potentially much more odious characters than Cleghorn does. He discusses the way in which Dickens describes the prostitute

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[24] p.127 for example.

Nancy, as "this young lady," and the revolting Fagin as "the merry old gentleman," and says that everyone is "struck with a sense of the ludicrous" at the preposterous nature of the compliments. Dickens gains the truth and the humour of his scene at the same time, and by the use of his humour manages to avoid offending the fastidious. The agency of the comic in this way is not visible to Cleghorn who can only see the underlying immoral nature of Dick Swiveller. Horne, interestingly enough, objects (pp.36-40) to the creation of sympathy for Sykes, who ceases to be a murderer and becomes a miserable "hunted human creature." This, he claims, defeats the author's moral aim. Here, comic art seems in fact, more useful in a moral way than non-comic art, although Horne does not say so. Clearly, though, because comedy is suspected of being frivolous, it is defended by critics like Horne as a moral agent and is shown to be compatible with truthful and useful art. When a definite use is found for comedy, it is much more likely to be accepted than when it appears merely to be an adornment of art. In the Victorian period, often the difference between a comic and a non-comic writer is that the comic writer needs to be justified in some way.

Potentially, the most useful kind of comic art is satire, but because it is a means of attack or criticism, it is usually treated warily by reviewers. Thus, in hoping that Dickens will submit the architectural profession to some healthy satire through Mr. Pecksniff, W.H. Leeds, in the Athenaeum (4 March 1843, p.209), predicts, "little doubt is there that, whatever may be its success, some will protest against the character as unjust, and calculated to excite a prejudice against the profession generally, and others that the profession itself does not offer a sufficient number of salient peculiarities and absurdities for ridicule to fasten on." Almost as if in justification of this prediction, though not with the reference Leeds expects, Cleghorn (pp.73-74) protests that the satire of Mr. Mould is an "unfeeling attack

on a respectable class of tradesmen" who perform well a necessary job in society. He does not, however, object to Mrs. Gamp for a similar reason - although she is said to be revolting - perhaps because he thinks her profession is not so noble or so necessary. A similar kind of protest is made, against Dickens's portrayal of aristocratic characters, by Sharpe's London Magazine (May 1848, pp.202-3). The reviewer does not believe that Dickens is guilty of partiality against the aristocracy, but he is so popular a writer that his works may "give a very dangerous impulse" to anti-aristocratic feelings in society. Around this time especially, but throughout much of the rest of Dickens's career, the fear of revolution is strong in English society, and his portrayals of idiotic aristocrats are rarely liked, particularly among journals which appeal to the higher ranks of society. Thus, it is not surprising to find John Eagles, in Blackwood's Magazine (October 1848, p.468) objecting to Dickens's "mischievous" aim to "decry, and bring into contempt as unfeeling, the higher classes." Even the highly favourable English Review (December 1848, p.270) says that the first chapter of Martin Chuzzlewit is a "very pert and 'haberdasherlike' attack on all claims of ancestry and lofty birth." Because of their assumption that fiction is, or ought to be, always relevant to life, reviewers are more inclined to discussion of the truth and justice of the satire than they are to consideration of its function within the work of art.

The same kind of criticism arises in reviews of David Copperfield. Powell (1851, p.97) notes that there is a tyrannical schoolmaster in the novel and says that a survey of Dickens's works would lead to the infallible conclusion that all instructors of youth were bad. This, he says, is not true and the fiction is therefore misleading. A similar protest is raised even earlier in the novel's course, by the Family Herald (28 July 1849, pp.204-5). The educational satire contained in the novel's

first three Numbers is unfair because teachers are no more evil or immoral than members of any other profession. The details of the school are unreal - no such school as Salem House exists, the reviewer says "on this side of purgatory," and if such a brute of a headmaster as Creakle exists, "we should lay the blame entirely on the unnatural parents who supported him!" The question of the truthfulness of the fiction is here closely bound up with the question of its effect, and the reviewer adds, "It would be well for Charles Dickens' present usefulness as a moral teacher, if he were to take his sketches more frequently from Nature, and less frequently from the boards of the old Globe, or with an eye to the modern Adelphi Theatre." The suspicion that Dickens may not intend his description of Salem House as an educational satire crosses the reviewer's mind, and he adds that, although it may all be "mere fun on the part of the author," if the satirist's whip needs to be cracked - which he does not believe - it must be cracked in earnest, because "wheresoever such jesting discipline is used, it is morally inefficient." And if Dickens is in sport only, his fiction runs the risk of misleading public opinion with respect to the teaching profession.[25] The novelist is, as I have said, claimed to be a teacher of a kind himself, whether he intends to be or not, and as a kind of public performer he must watch that he does not set a bad example or mislead public opinion.

Dickens's fiction in this instance is no doubt seen as satire because he was famous for his educational satire, after his early success with Dotheboys Hall. Hickson, in the Westminster Review (April 1847, Collins pp.225-26), a journal favourable to Utilitarian, rational reform, praises him in this respect in a review of Dombey and Son. He says, "The rising generation will have reason to be grateful to Mr. Dickens, for his temperate yet severe rebuke of all attempts to overtask a child's

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[25] This argument is identical to Fitzjames Stephen's on Dickens's unfairness to social institutions and public servants. See below, p.162.

intellect. By his quiet satire of a fashionable classical institution in the present work, not less than for his exposure of a vulgar and brutal ignorance in another class of academies, described in Nicholas Nickleby, he deserves the thanks of all educational reformers. And even Blackwood's Magazine (October 1848, p.469), which is angry with Dickens for his attitude to the upper classes and for the tone of his novels, has to "acknowledge that he has done much good. He should be immortalized, if only for the putting down the school tyrannies, exposing and crushing school pretensions, and doubtless saving many a fair intellect from withering blight and perversion." Not only is the exposure effectively carried out, there is some belief in the practical effectiveness of the satire.

Already Dickens's powers as a moral teacher are under attack, however. The Christmas Books in particular arouse some opposition, and in a review of The Haunted Man, Macphail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal (January 1849, Collins p.180) says that Dickens has attempted to become a solemn "regenerator of the human race" instead of just an amuser of the public, but in his new character he fails because he is "both too tiny and too playful." The implication here seems to be that the comic writer should not attempt to be more than a source of public amusement. This comment prefigures the opposition from the Saturday Review and others in the latter part of Dickens's career, and represents the opposite side of the coin from those who are bent on arguing that Dickens is more than a mere comic writer. In general, reviewers are favourable to him in this middle period, but their uneasy consciences with respect to the comedy of the novels are probably concealed behind the kind of high-flown rhetoric which I quoted from Forster's review of David Copperfield, in the Examiner (14 December 1850). It is seen again, with closer reference to the comic, in Forster's comment (p.798) on the "blending of playful, often

grotesque humour, with such stern delineations of selfish guilt, smooth duplicity, and unmitigated meanness and falsehood" as are presented in Littimer and Uriah Heep. At all times, reviewers seek ways of rising above the comic to "higher" effects. Thus, Sharpe's London Magazine (May 1848, p.200) despite its qualms mentioned above, attests its admiration of Dickens because "he has always written, not only for the temporary amusement of his readers, but with a view to their general interests and improvement; and be his subject matter grave or gay, the broadest humour or the deepest pathos, he omits no opportunity of inculcating religious and philosophical truths in his homely characters." This encouragement of "right" reactions in his readers is praised also by the Dublin University Magazine (April 1844, p.520) in its comment on A Christmas Carol : we rise from it "happy, smiling, and good; animated with benevolence and charity. We have been obliged to sob as we laughed, and to chuckle through our tears. It softens and subdues the heart, and preaches powerfully though indirectly that creed which in the breasts of the best of us is acknowledged and adored as Christian." If this begins with a comment about the comedy of the work it quickly moves well beyond it into a realm that seems divorced from the comic.

Near the end of the middle period, the Working Man's Friend and Family Instructor (21 August 1852, p.328) attributes benevolence to Dickens's humour and it is not surprising, in view of the journal's title, to find that it predicts a good future for Dickens's novels because, as well as exhibiting his genius, "they appeal to our best sympathies, and sustain the cause of the suffering poor." This is as much a political comment as is the more obviously political statement made earlier by the New Moral World,[26] but, void of definite party affiliation, it may have been

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[26] See above, p. 45.

acceptable to most Victorians because it merely emphasises the need for the cultivation of certain feelings and attitudes. Dickens is usually successful when he encourages more general moral effects, but when he appears to encroach upon areas which are affected by the critics' political or social opinions, he treads dangerous ground, and the protests made by Blackwood's Magazine and others in this period indicate faintly what happens in the next two decades.

The early novels generally retain their reputation for effective satire and acceptable moral teaching, but in the middle period doubts are beginning to be raised. The generally sensible Masson, for example, in the North British Review (May 1851, Collins p.253),notes that Dickens has "rendered, on various occasions, very zealous and important services to the cause of public morality and benevolence," but in recent novels there has been some decline, and Masson suggests that this kind of public service is better performed through Household Words than through fiction. The danger is, he suggests (p.254), that discussions of his fiction may degenerate into debates over his politics or theories. Masson is able, unlike some of his contemporaries, to distinguish between Dickens as creator of Squeers and Creakle and Dickens as a man who "tells us how he would have boys educated;" between Dickens as creator of Dennis the hangman and Dickens as a man with an "opinion on capital punishments," and so on. Yet Masson sees Dickens as both a creator and a man who argues his opinions, and insists that if Dickens is going to include such matters in his works, it is not unfair that he should be expected to conduct his arguments "right-royally, like an Apollo in the robe of a barrister." This is the price Dickens pays for being allowed to discuss topical matters in his novels, and though Masson finds that some of his ideas are "sound and excellent," he finds fault, generally, with the practice. Much of the debate that occurs later over Dickens's aims,

doctrines and effects is based on a similar assumption. The novel is not really the place to include discussions of serious subjects, but if they are included, the novelist must not treat them in a cavalier fashion, but must argue them fully and fairly to some kind of conclusion. In his later book (1859), Masson quotes part of this earlier statement and adds (reprint[27] p.34) that much is owed to Dickens "for this very opinionativeness." He has thrown out phrases such as "The Circumlocution Office" which have been "efficacious for social reform," and "it matters little that some of them might turn out on inquiry to be ludicrous exaggerations."

Such arguments as the critics conduct with Dickens may be concerned with highly important social or political matters, or they may be apparently trivial and slightly ridiculous. A reviewer of Number Three of David Copperfield in Bell's New Weekly Messenger (8 July 1849, p.6) protests about the character of Peggotty "who takes stranger liberties with her mistress than any servant ever took before," and says,

> The demonstration of good-heartedness in a domestic servant is always effective in a novel, and we are not prepared to say that it is not without its uses; but at the same time it seems to us that the example of a servant not only neglecting her duties to gratify an inordinate affection for an individual, but acting in absolute contravention of the orders of her employers, is not a good one to hold up to the class from which "Peggotty" is drawn. A real life Peggotty would lose situation and character both by acting in the way Mr. Dickens describes.

This may seem trivial, but it recalls a point made earlier, that fiction is seen, by the critics, to be immediately concerned with life, and even such a trivial example indicates their strong belief in the relevance of fiction to life and their consequent concern for the effects of fiction. When Dickens becomes even more embroiled in social and political matters, during the rest of his career, he arouses not only the critics' sectional

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[27] Ford and Lane, op.cit. Again, I mention it here because it is of a piece with his 1851 article.

viewpoints but also the ever-present concern for the effects of fiction upon readers.

The Later Novels : 1853 -1870

A statement that seems even more ridiculous than that of Bell's New Weekly Messenger appears in an article by C.F. Riggs, on Dickens's characters, in Putnam's Monthly Magazine (November 1853, p.562). Riggs praises Mr. Jarndyce's proposal of marriage to Esther for its tenderness and delicacy and recommends it as "an example worthy of being imitated by any soft-hearted old gentleman who may have a desire to marry his housekeeper." But such an over-simple yet harmless reading of the relationship between literature and life comes almost as a relief amidst the heavily moral and often politically-motivated discussions, during this period, of Dickens's teaching and the effects of his comic fiction.

That reviewers, as well as the public in general, find Dickens laughable is neither surprising nor particularly illuminating. His reputation as a particular kind of humorist, in fact, leads to stock responses which are repeated even when they do not really fit the fiction that is being reviewed. This occurs in the Athenaeum's review (1 December 1855, p.1393) of the first Number of Little Dorrit, where Dickens is thanked for bringing into every household such laughter and tears as "brighten and purify the heart." Perhaps the same person wrote the review of the same Number in the Monthly Review (January 1856, p.40) because almost exactly the same words are used. Mrs. Oliphant, for all her hardness towards Dickens's fiction, has a soft spot for his power of raising tears and laughter, which she praises in Blackwood's Magazine (April 1855, Collins p.335).[28] But it is more interesting when the reviewers find that the novels are not funny. The judgement made by

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[28] She praises it again in her June 1871 article (p.675).

the reviewer in Bentley's Miscellany (October 1853, Collins p.288), that Bleak House is notable for its "almost entire absence of humour" is surprising, especially since he goes on to say that while Dickens seems to have ceased to be a humorous writer he also seems to have been "warmed into a pathetic one." But the reviewer probably expects humour to be truthful to human nature, and his complaint is "that the Smallweeds are revolting and that many of the other characters are unnatural. According to Chorley, in the Athenaeum (17 September 1853, Collins p.277), the odd characters in the novel "cannot fail" to give the reader fatigue, not merely because of their unnaturalness but also because they are so numerous. That later reviewers often find Dickens's characters to be unnatural needs no further comment, but their noting an absence of comedy in the later characters and novels is bound up with their unwillingness to laugh at characters who seem repulsive.

But, if the later novels are felt to be less laughable, they are sometimes said to be better in art. I have already quoted above[29] comments made by Whipple, in the Atlantic Monthly (May 1867, Collins p.482), and by Dallas, in The Times (29 November 1865, p.6), which claim that Our Mutual Friend may not be as funny as earlier novels - Pickwick Papers becomes the standard against which Dickens is constantly judged - but it shows greater purpose and deeper thought. These comments, however, do not answer a question that is persistently raised by later reviewers: whether a comic writer is inherently not a "serious" writer and therefore not worthy of serious consideration. As I said above,[30] Henry James, reviewing the same novel in the Nation (21 December 1865,

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29 p.25.

30 pp. 29-30,77.

Collins p.473), says that Dickens, in his later comic characters either creates deformities or fails to produce "serious writing." As a student of human nature he fails, and Justin McCarthy, in the Westminster Review (October 1864, p.432),shows a typical attitude to the comic writer who attempts to discuss important social or political matters. He says that when an author proposes to write a "funny book," nobody "troubles himself to examine his theories." That is, the comic Dickens is in danger of being laughed at too much, both as a student of human nature and as a critic of society.

Yet Dickens is taken seriously. For some reviewers, the question does not seem to arise whether the comic writer ought to be taken seriously or not, and for some the desire to show that he is more than a mere comic writer is urgent because of their awareness of attempts to write him down. And even those who attempt to write him down take note of him in this way, because even if they do not believe that Dickens achieves what he sets out to do, they find nevertheless that there are or may be "serious" effects consequent upon his fictions.

The expectation that Dickens should be more than a comic writer is voiced during the later part of his career. The American H. Dennison, in the National Quarterly Review (June 1860, p.97) claims that early readers preferred Pickwick Papers to Nicholas Nickleby, despite the latter novel's better construction and greater human insight. This shows, Dennison complains, that "after all it is more to be amused than to be instructed that people read light literature," and he discusses the lesson that Dickens's works afford to readers who have more sense. The National Review (July 1861, p.135) says,"No writer likes to be wholly comic," and one reason for this is that the oddities of the characters may make the reader forget the "general scheme of the story," and another is that the writer "would be a mere buffoon if he were always willing to

grimace and caper, in order to steal a giggle out of the public." Dickens, in his earlier novels, "delivered himself up to his genial sense of fun," the reviewer claims, but since then he has "always striven to have a serious side to his books," and Martin Chuzzlewit is one of the novels which shows an increased sense of moral purpose. The "serious sides" of characters like Mrs. Gamp and Mr. Pecksniff are later discussed (pp.144-49) to show that there is more than mere "fun" in Dickens, but comedy is nevertheless not rated high as a "moral agent." For a comic writer, Dickens achieves a lot, but a comic writer is naturally limited in what he can do.[31] Reviewing Our Mutual Friend, the Christian Spectator (December 1865, pp.721-22) looks beneath the exaggeration of the novel and discerns lessons beneath. The reviewer says, "It is not all fun. Mr. Dickens has always been something more than a comic writer, and this work contains evidences of a set purpose to do good." Dickens, that is, is "never merely the humourist, it is still more unjust to call him simply a caricaturist." Still, Dickens is not of the highest class because his fictional world is not the real world of temptation and duty.[32]

As a moral teacher Dickens is often praised. The kind of thing that may be expected of literature is stated by John Hollingshead in The Train (August 1857, p.78). He says, "The duties of poetry are well defined. They are the refining of the human mind, the education of the emotive sympathies, and the spiritual alleviation of the sufferings of humanity." This claims more than most reviewers - even favourable ones - are willing to admit the novelist in general, let alone the comic novelist. But as Fitzjames Stephen says,in the Edinburgh Review (July

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31 This is a matter of stature, and is further discussed in Chapter Four.

32 See above, pp. 82-83.

1857, p.125), novels are, "to an inquisitive youth . . . a series of lectures upon life," and novelists are "perhaps the most influential of all indirect moral teachers." This feeling that a novelist is, whether he will or no, an instructor of his readers is apparent in this period, and to a certain extent the influence is accepted. The Literary Gazette (13 July 1861, p.33) finds the "indirect and incidental moral teaching" in Great Expectations to be "of the highest and truest kind," and Talbot, in Putnam's Monthly Magazine (March 1855, p.265), surprisingly says that as a moralist Dickens is at times better than Shakespeare because the dramatist, according to Talbot, almost makes us respect Macbeth and Richard III who are heroes as well as villains. Dickens, on the other hand, never allows us to "abate our aversion" to characters such as Quilp and Pecksniff: "The novelist never toys with his victims, nor patches their unmixed depravity with any incongruous goodness, to perplex our moral perceptions." But Talbot only achieves such an opinion by avoiding the comedy of the two characters. In fact, he does not, at this point, seem to see any, because a third example given alongside these is Carker. R.H. Hutton, however, is fully aware of the comic in Dickens, and he says, in a discussion of Dickens's "Moral Services to Literature" in the Spectator (17 April 1869, p.475) that in his work "the humourist not unfrequently swallows up the moralist," even when Dickens denounces a Pecksniff or a Podsnap. He repeats the idea in an article entitled "The Influence of Dickens on Society," in the Spectator (11 June 1870). In the case of a character like Pecksniff, he says (reprint[33] p.144), humour "tends to obliterate the distinctions between good and evil altogether," but in general the effects are beneficent. In the same article he says that humour, in Dickens's case as in every other, is a "great solvent of all exclusiveness and intoler-

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[33] loc. cit.

ance, a great enemy to social, to intellectual, to moral, to religious bigotry." He has shown, for example, that "vulgar" life is a mine of interest and he has taught readers to be tolerant of individual eccentricity (p.146). Even more importantly, Dickens is said (p.143) to have taught a number of valuable lessons - through characters like Charley Bates and the Dodger - about the "dangerous classes," and also, in various novels, about the Poor Law and about incompetent philanthropy. In the 1869 article, moreover, Hutton finds (p.475) that his greatest moral service to literature is to create humour that is not morally impure, like that of Swift, Smollett and Fielding. This seems to be little more than a reappearance of the favourite argument of early reviewers, that Dickens's fiction would not make a maiden blush, and Hutton's reading of the effects of the comedy is rather uninspiring, which is to be expected since he does not really believe the humorist to be capable of any deep or far-reaching insight into human nature.[34]

Though the blending of comedy and moral instruction may still be seen to be a precarious business, the achievement of it is felt to deserve special praise. The Congregationalist Eclectic Review (October 1861, p.471) says, in this vein, that Dickens's "profusion of absurdity, his perception of the ludicrous analogies of things, is not short of amazing," and it is just as remarkable that this great comic power "does not appear to impair his moral character and balance," no mean feat when "every object and every character met suggests a joke." The High Church Ecclesiastic and Theologian (October 1855, p.472) at first claims that Dickens rarely uses satire. Probably the reviewer says this because he has in mind bitter, offensive satire, but he goes on to discuss what

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[34] See above, p.93 For Hutton's assessment of Dickens's stature, see below, p. 297.

appears to be satire when he says that Dickens has generally been able to "weave the objects of his indignation . . . with the structure of the tale" or has devoted "detached passages, oftentimes of great eloquence, to their denunciation." Even in Bleak House, which "absolutely bristles with social questions," the reviewer feels that "no single allusion to them seems out of place." No man, he says, has written more than Dickens has "so completely as though he aimed at amusement only," even though "no man has written more than he has with other purposes in view besides amusement." For this reviewer, Dickens achieves a nice balance.

As a satirist however, Dickens is sometimes felt to be too funny to be successful. V.H. Hobart, in Fraser's Magazine (July 1859, pp.99), claims Thackeray's superiority as a satirist because he exposes the "littlenesses, meannesses and vulgarities of his fellow-creatures, while Dickens's most successful "humorous characters" are said to be "rather amiable than otherwise." According to Hobart, we rarely feel for them anything like the "animosity or contempt"we ought to feel if the satirist has done his work. Reviewing Masson's British Novelists and their Styles, the British Quarterly Review (October 1859, pp.463-64), a Congregationalist journal, comes to a similar conclusion about the merits of the two authors. Dickens creates such merriment over reprehensible characters like Mrs. Gamp, that the real moral lesson is in danger of being lost, but Thackeray is a much sterner moralist who makes the faults of his characters clear and unambiguous. The problem with comic fiction is that it appears to be superficial and it therefore does not satisfy reviewers like Brimley, who, reviewing Bleak House in the Spectator (24 September 1853, p.924), says "We read with some other purpose than to laugh," but finds that the satire of the novel is so exaggerated it is robbed of its "wholesome effect," and that Dickens's lack of

knowledge of human nature allows him only to amuse rather than to instruct his readers. No settled opinion is reached on the efficiency of Dickens's satire and moral instruction: much depends on the reviewer's opinion of Dickens generally, on his power to pierce the comic surface to read any lessons that are contained in it, and on his predetermined assumption whether comedy can or cannot be the vehicle of moral instruction. In general, moral instruction is allowed Dickens,but the common feeling is that he would be even more effective were he not a comic writer.

In satire, however, comedy and didacticism obviously go together. Often reviewers are still inclined to be carried away by their rhetoric when they discuss the effects of satire. For example the Illustrated London News (24 September 1853, Collins pp.281-82), says of Bleak House, that passages in it "expose fraud, unmask and brand hypocrisy, put selfishness out of conceit with itself, show the pampered turpitude of cant in all the truth of its revolting deformity, and confirm, by irresistible impressions, whatever feelings tend in our day towards the reconciliation of estranged interests, towards the promotion of healthy sentiment among the public, and towards the practical amelioration of society." One quickly realises that this is what the novel ought to do, rather than necessarily what it does, but there were many to testify that the effects of the novels were not as laudable as this critic appears to believe. "Writing with a purpose" is often a term of abuse in the period, but it is especially reserved for those occasions on which the reviewer does not agree with the author. When he does agree, there is nothing wrong with the art, but when he disagrees, art as well as purpose are dismissed as improper. The Saturday Review, for example, disagrees with Dickens in political matters and often in his social criticism, but in its review (11 November 1865, Collins pp.462-63) of Our Mutual Friend, having made a typical adverse criticism of the character of Veneering, the reviewer

praises that of Podsnap, which, he says, coarsely but effectively reveals an "ogre of society" to readers. It is difficult to see why Podsnap is any truer to life than Veneering is and why one character should be preferred to the other, except that the reviewer agrees with Dickens's stance in one case and disagrees in the other.

The uproar that usually surroundscriticism of Dickens's satire is focussed mainly upon extra-literary concerns. Opposition is greatest from the journals which have strong political, social and religious viewpoints. Dickens is seen by McCarthy, in the rationalist Westminster Review (October 1864, p.417), as the leader of a movement which has "perverted" the novel from a work of art to a platform for the discussion of politics. In a later review, of Our Mutual Friend, in the same journal (April 1866, Collins p.476), an anonymous reviewer says, with even stronger practical emphasis,that novels are not the place for the kind of reformist purpose Dickens has, because "the practical English mind is, as a rule, repelled by any advocacy in the shape of fiction. And to attempt to alter the Poor Law by a novel is about as absurd as it would be to call out the militia to stop the cattle disease." If Dickens wants to dabble in such matters, the reviewer says, he should write a pamphlet or enter Parliament.

Not everyone dislikes the tendency to this extent, and J.C. Jeaffreson, in his Novels and Novelists from Elizabeth to Victoria (1858, pp.318-21) also evokes the practical English mind when he protests at great length against the arguments of those who condemn Dickens for writing with a purpose. Dickens's moral instruction and exposure of abuses evince his practicality and earnestness, Jeaffreson says, and those who protest loudest against this aspect of his art, pride themselves on these very qualities. Such people, instead of protesting, should in fact find the fictions interesting, but since they protest they only show that they

are dull and stupid. The "wisest and best" men study such novels and learn from them, as does the majority of the populace, according to Jeaffreson. Aside from the debated wisdom of the general public andwhether it is only a minority who protest against "writing with a purpose," much does depend on whether the critic is disposed to be friendly towards the author. E.S. Dallas, writing of Our Mutual Friend in The Times (29 November 1865, p.6),is well-disposed towards Dickens and merely says of the novel's protest against the Poor Law that it shows that "when a man such as Mr. Dickens has a practical object in view, it is more in his mind than all the triumphs of his art. It would please him more to do good to the thousands of poor people . . . than to entertain all the novel readers in the world." The passages of social protest are not considered to be artistic, but recognition of this is not made the platform for vehement denunciation of the author, and Dallas goes on to discuss Dickens's art rather than his politics. Another friend of the author's, John Hollingshead, seems to dislike his politics, but also refrains from discussing them. In The Train (August 1857, p.78), having "defined" the sphere of poetry's influence,[35] he goes on to say that when poetry leaves the useful sphere set aside for it and "attempts the re-organisation of society," the result is "impracticable socialism." Hollingshead dislikes Dickens's tendency, but he does not discuss it further.

Such restraint is not shown by the Westminster Review, the Saturday Review, and other journals who gleefully pounce upon Dickens's alleged errors and prejudices. But they are not the only ones to object, and many sympathetic critics are sorry to see Dickens making the errors he does. Bentley's Monthly Review (October 1853) in a review of Bleak House, traces his career from the beginning, and claims (p.221) that it was in

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[35] See above, p.154.

Nicholas Nickleby that Dickens threw aside "cap and bells" and wrote for the benefit and instruction of the public. His later satires, however, are said (p.227) to differ from the earlier successes, because now Dickens meddles with complex matters he does not understand. Chancery reform is needed, but Dickens's novel will not help to attain it. More kindly, the Eclectic Review (December 1853, pp.666-67) says that the exposure is ineffective because it is too late, but the reviewer adds that there is nevertheless a freshness about the portrayal of the abuse that makes readers grateful that reform is under way. He protests, however, against Mr. Chadband who seems to him to be an unfair attack on sectarian religion, and against the philanthropic ladies in the novel, who, he feels malign the large number of ladies in society who do genuine good. Chadband is also objected to by Mrs. Oliphant, in Blackwood's Magazine (April 1855, Collins p.334), who considers that all his attacks on religious hypocrites are unfair. S.F. Williams, in the Rose, Shamrock and Thistle (IV 1864, p.79) correctly observes, however, that Dickens's satire is on the cant of religion rather than religion itself, a fact that the British Quarterly Review (vol.24, 1854 p.582) cannot grasp, for it says that Dickens only portrays religion in his works as "an element of cant and hypocrisy, not as a matter rooted in honest convictions."

Religious journals, quoted so far in this section, are generous to Dickens when he has a moral purpose, but religion itself is obviously a dangerous subject for Dickens to handle. But the harshest attacks in this period of his career are reserved for his social and political satire. Dickens is felt to be so weak in these areas, that E.B. Hamley, in his "Remonstrance with Dickens," in Blackwood's Magazine (April 1857), objects to Dickens's decision to become a moralist and a reformer of society. He was best as the humorist who created Pickwick Papers and he is writing below himself in his recent novels. The satire against the

Circumlocution Office is welcome and will probably be effective and popular, Hamley says (p.503), but "we like you more than we dislike it, and are sorry you wrote in a style below your reputation." Here the former amuser of the public is missed because his humour was better than his satire now is. The Rambler (October 1854, Collins p.303) agrees, but with a different emphasis. The reviewer says, "It is a thousand pities that Mr. Dickens does not confine himself to amusing his readers, instead of wandering out of his depth in trying to instruct them. The one, no man can do better; the other, few men can do worse." The attempt to reduce Dickens merely to an amuser of the public is common among those who dislike his politics or otherwise feel that he has an unfortunate influence on his readers. This may be seen often in the work of Fitzjames Stephen, Dickens's most vigorous adversary during this period. Not only are Dickens's opinions lacking in truth, Stephen says, in the Saturday Review (3 January 1857, Collins p.346), but Dickens "may, and as we believe, does exercise a very wide and very pernicious political and social influence." As a comic writer, Dickens attempts to escape censure, according to Stephen (Collins p.347). He "introduces the gravest subjects in a manner which makes it impossible that he should do them justice. He scatters fire, and says, Am I not in sport?" Later, in the Edinburgh Review (July 1857, pp.130-31), Stephen says that Dickens paints "all who govern as fools, knaves, hypocrites and dawdling tyrants." The "poor and uneducated" and "the young and inexperienced" are likely to be misled in their opinions of society and its guardians, by the fictions of the comic writer. In the earlier article, Stephen says (Collins pp.345-46) similarly, that "the vast majority of mankind" do not have the sense to understand when Dickens is telling lies. The comic writer ought not to be taken seriously. In fact, a comic writer - or any novelist - should not concern himself with such highly important matters as Dickens meddles with, in Stephen's opinion. But

since Dickens does so meddle, Stephen is forced to take his work very seriously indeed.

Paradoxically, Stephen attempts to write Dickens down as a mere comic writer. The pose he often adopts is to assume that Dickens should not be listened to. He asks, in the 3 January 1857 article (Collins p.345), whether it is not foolish to attempt to refute Dickens, just as it would be foolish to "undertake the refutation of the jokes of a clown in a Christmas pantomine," and he says in his review of Little Dorrit, in the Saturday Review (4 July 1857, p.15), that Dickens "has a mission, but it is to make the world grin, not to recreate and rehabilitate society." On 11 July 1857, in the same journal (p.34), Stephen says that the charge he brings against Dickens is "that he makes himself a legislator and philosopher because he is an amusing writer." This is, of course, unfair to Dickens, but it clearly makes the point that, for Stephen, comedy and social purpose do not go together. The business of writers like Dickens, he says in the same article (p.35), is to amuse the public, but the position seems to be "unwelcome and degrading" and such writers go out of their way to propose a number of "impertinent and unfounded assumptions" which mislead ignorant readers.

The main point of all this is that Dickens's effects on society are pernicious and he has such a wide-reaching influence because he is extremely popular as a comic writer. Comedy sometimes deals lightly with the subjects it treats of, and therefore comic writers should not concern themselves with profound and serious social and political matters. Stephen is doubly angry because it seems to him that the comic writer cannot be pinned down to any established set of values or opinions. Similar reactions may be seen in other journals. Bagehot, in the National Review (October 1858, reprint, p.214[36]), feels that Dickens

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36 loc. cit.

attacks abuses which are "the natural evils and inevitable pains of the present state of being" and causes "discontent and repining" amongst his readers. Here, of course, the radical Dickens comes up against the whole blank wall of laissez-faire attitudes and mid-Victorian self-confidence as well as the kind of vested interest in the aristocratic institutions of society that is evident in Stephen's comments. Such objections are not new - they had been heard in the middle years of Dickens's career, as I have shown - but they are expressed more forcefully than ever before during the 1850s and 1860s. According to McCarthy, in the Westminster Review (October 1864, p.431), no one would think of discussing Dickens as a moralist, politician and reformer, did he not claim to be such in the Prefaces to his novels. In his topical satires he has, McCarthy says (p.438), pointed out defects in a number of institutions, but "he has uniformly overstated the case, he has not often understood it, and never has he pointed out any remedy. It may be added that his criticism has generally come too late." The United States Magazine (September 1853, p.277), discussing Bleak House, shows a similar impatience with Dickens's Chancery satire. He has, the reviewer feels, told his readers nothing about the Court except that it is a nuisance, and he refuses to discuss a matter that Dickens himself does not attempt to argue in a serious manner.

Many reviewers who hold such opinions seem to expect the novel to do what Forster says in the Examiner (9 September 1854, Collins p.301) that it cannot do, and that is "to prove a case." Its "utmost purpose," he says, "is to express forcibly a righteous sentiment." But those who seem to expect more would probably have answered that if the novelist could not treat of such highly important subjects fully, he should have left them alone. Indeed, the Westminster Review, quoted above,[37] says

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37 p.159.

that the novel is the wrong place for all such matters. But Forster does not go so far. He is willing that novelists should discuss whatever subjects they wish, and suggests that a change in the critics' attitude is needed. The Illustrated Times (8 December 1855, p.435) says that Dickens's determination to have a "purpose" has the unfortunate effect of provoking "antagonistic and controversial feelings, which mar artistic enjoyment," and in the light of the reaction surveyed above, the comment is justified. As I showed in the previous chapter, much depends on the rigidity of the demand for truthfulness in fiction. The National Review (July 1861, pp.143-44), discussed above[38] accepts one-sided representations of institutions, and the Leader (11 July 1857, p.664), laughs at Stephen's attack on Little Dorrit, in the Edinburgh Review, and at his expectation of a "full and fair account of the whole science and art of government.[39]" Those who do not expect too much to result from the satirist's work are, in general, those who have the most valuable things to say about it.

As a satirist, Dickens is nevertheless felt by some to be highly successful, although the frequency with which the early satires are dwelt upon seems to suggest that perhaps his reputation depends a little too much on past performances. Thackeray, in his lecture on "Charity and Humour" (Collins p.354) claims that the early satire directed against the Yorkshire Schools was highly effective - parents were ashamed, pupils were taken away from schools, schoolmasters were accused of being Squeerses, and schoolboys were much better fed and much more kindly treated. The early satires tend to retain the reputation for effectiveness, though not necessarily as effective as Thackeray's rhetoric makes

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38 p. 86.

39 Stephen appears to miss the irony of Dickens's title to Book I Chapter 10 of the novel.

it sound. The American Frank Walker, in the University Quarterly (January 1860, p.95), says that Dickens's exposure of various institutions in his novels has left the active reform movement of his country much indebted to him, and in the London Review (16 November 1867, p.548), Friswell asserts that Dickens "had often experienced the force of his writings; he tells us that the Fleet prison exposed in Pickwick is no more, and that the Yorkshire schools are better. Mr. Laing, a coarse magistrate, portrayed in a like manner . . . felt the power of the novelist and was glad to resign." In Martin Chuzzlewit too, the portrayal of Mrs. Gamp is said to have dealt a "shrewd death-blow" to nurses of her type. If actual improvement or reform is not necessarily known to have followed, at least the reviewers can say that the exposure took place and this is felt to be a praiseworthy office for the novelist to have performed. Praise for one of the later satires which caused a lot of opposition is found in the American Knickerbocker magazine (August 1857, p.189) which quotes "an able daily critic" who says, "No Englishman hereafter will be able to look into the face of any of his hereditary legislators without thinking of Mr. Tite Barnacle, or Lord Decimus Barnacle; and nobody will ever have anything to do with government anywhere without confounding it with the Circumlocution Office." This is the very kind of opinion that some British critics fear. In its exaggerated assessment of the potential effects of the satire, it merely represents the other end of the scale from the exaggerated fears of the likes of Stephen, and placed alongside Stephen's objections, it shows how much they are based on class considerations and a concern for the status quo in British society and politics. American critics may have been free from the kind of fear of revolution that some Britons had, stemming from the year of revolution in Europe, 1848, and even from the earlier Chartist agitation, but the reactions of British critics need to be understood in terms of their social and political context - and in terms

of their "literary" context: most journals held views on the kinds of topics Dickens raised, and it is to be expected that they should allow to enter their criticism opinions that would now be deemed extra-literary.

At the time of Dickens's death, even those who had strongly attacked his works in the past were inclined to be more favourable. The Saturday Review (11 June 1870, p.761) says that "His evident sincerity of purpose gave a kind of dignity to his writings, and took away from them all air of coming from a man who was merely making merry to get money from the public." That is, Dickens is more than just a comic writer, but the main message his comedy is said to teach seems rather lame: "That there is fun and goodness in all sorts of persons, high and low, and even very low, was a theme on which he loved to dwell, and which he brought home to all his readers by the example of the characters he delineated." Like Hutton in the Spectator quoted above,[40] the obituarist in the Saturday Review does not really place the comic artist's achievements on a high level, and his praise throughout is rather restrained. He says, for example, of the American satire in Martin Chuzzlewit, that it tells us "all that can be said or thought of that portion of the life led there which comes within the sphere of a novelist." Compared to some of the journal's earlier strictures, this is generous, but it does not allow the novelist very much. At times in other obituaries, adverse criticism almost appears but is held at bay. William Mackay, in the New Monthly Magazine (July 1870, p.88) is generally full of eulogy, but he does question whether it is right for an author to go out of his way to point a moral or seek a reform through his fiction. However, Mackay seems to realise that the question is ill-timed and merely says that whether it is

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[40] p.156.

right or wrong, Dickens gained affection by doing so, and if the artist is sincere there is no reason why he should not include his views on morality, religion and philanthropy in his works of art.

Most obituarists are full of praise for the deceased author and paint the most flattering picture possible, as they pay their "last respects" to him. Often there are long lists of moral and practical effects of his writings. The Sunday Times (12 June 1870), for example, says that through his characters Dickens will continue to live, and "will through uncounted generations continue to influence mankind, softening the asperities of caste and class, redeeming poverty from shame, giving tenderness to compassion, suffusing justice with mercy, gently making the pietist ashamed of hypocrisies, and stimulating all to broader charities, to more genuine nobleness, and more genial dignity." Truly Dickens is more than a mere comic writer. One wonders why the writer here says "genial dignity" if he does not have Dickens's comedy in his mind as he says all this, but the tendency to ignore the comic in Dickens - except in the most general terms - and to concentrate on the highly moral, is to be expected in solemn obituaries, and it is therefore no surprise to find Sala (1870, pp.42-44) discussing the satires - of the Yorkshire Schools, of Chancery, of the Ecclesiastical Courts, of imprisonment for debt, and of monthly nurses - and ignoring their comedy. More important for Sala is his argument that Dickens, through his fictions, influenced public opinion which in turn influenced the legislators and produced reform.

Dickens quite clearly was a teacher of moral lessons, and he did promote reforms of various kinds through his novels. Just as clearly, however, his reviewers frequently become obsessed with the political or actual effects of his work and ignore the means - often comic - by which such effects are communicated. The Union Magazine (February 1846)

quoted above[41] warns Dickens to consider the means as well as the moral end of his fiction, but it might just as well have warned Dickens's critics. Victorians all, they are deeply concerned about the moral effects of the age's greatest entertainer who, some feel, ought to give his readers a little more instruction, yet who, others feel, teaches enough, in either an acceptable or non-acceptable way. Whatever their opinions on the question, the reviewers leave a legacy, to the next generation, of a powerful interest in the effects of comic fiction. Already, however, interest in merely moral teaching is wearing off, and interest in Dickens's "philosophy" is appearing. It is ridiculed by McCarthy, in the Westminster Review (October 1864, p.431), as being resolvable into the proposition "that things are right." Dickens is an optimist who seems to believe that the world is generally a good place and all that needs to be done is to pass a few simple laws, and all will be well. Dickens's world is one where good and evil are rewarded "on the strictest principles of poetic justice," McCarthy says (p.432). Stott, in the Contemporary Review (February 1869, pp.224-25), claims that Dickens's "Theory of Life" is an expansion of the idea of Christmas, and the utopia that he would create would be a land of joviality and high-living, fit habitation only for benevolent old gentlemen, virtuous artizans, gushing young ladies - a veritable "paradise of fools." Dickens's faults are said to be based on personal inadequacies such as ignorance and lack of intellectual power,[42] and his teaching is felt to be limited. There are signs in this period that his appeal to the sympathies, which still works with the majority of his readers, is beginning to be questioned by some of them, and his work already fails to satisfy those who seek evidence of more intellect in novels. Such a reaction becomes more common in later decades.

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[41] pp.142-43.

[42] See below, p. 229.

Because Dickens's satire in particular becomes controversial in this period, there is great attention to the effects of comic fiction and to the uses to which fiction in general may be put. Even those who find that Dickens is successful or acceptable do not necessarily agree with his practice of using the novel as an instrument for social reform. Moral instruction is still largely accepted, although overt moral instruction is becoming less popular amongst those who begin to demand "ideas" from the novelist. The signs of changes which become more apparent in the generation after Dickens's death are already visible, and once the satires of the later novels lose their controversiality, the kind of mind that is felt not to be able to argue effectively for social reform is said to be unable to offer any worthwhile "philosophy."

The Generation After Dickens : 1871 - 1906

There are many in this period whose literary theories and practices are at odds with Dickens's novels. Because of greater than ever emphasis on the novelist's art and technique, Dickens's social purpose and overt moral tendencies seem clumsy and old-fashioned, but despite the doctrine of "art for art's sake," few really question the novel's relevance to life, and the moral and social emphases of his works continue to be discussed. No doubt the continued popularity of Dickens helps perpetuate the concern, but equally, the continuing tendency to seek moral and practical effects in fiction means that Dickens remains popular. The tendency is questioned by some, and novelists' methods of satisfying the demand for instruction become subtler, but the demand itself does not disappear. Basically, Dickens satisfies the undemanding critics' expectations but fails to impress the more demanding, philosophical and rational critics. This is bound up with widespread opinions of his truthfulness and stature which I discuss elsewhere. Chesterton, at the

end of the period, is not the first but he is the best of the critics who claim that Dickens satisfies more than the sentimental and the naive. As I shall show, one of his methods of doing so is to point out more worthwhile effects and lessons that Dickens offers his readers.

It is still felt that the novelist is a teacher whether he aims to teach or not. For example, the Dublin Review (April 1871, p.316) says of Dickens and Thackeray, "Both men were more than novelists, and humorists; both were preachers, in the sense in which every great writer of fiction must be, whether intentionally or not." Trollope, writing in The Nineteenth Century (January 1879, p.40) agrees: "The writer of stories must please, or he will be nothing. And he must teach, whether he wish to teach or not." The idea that pleasing and teaching are the aims of literature is a basic assumption of very many literary critics in all centuries, and the Victorians are certainly not alone in their expectations, but the utilitarian and evangelical impetus given to the search for purpose and morality in fiction in earlier decades begins to wear off later in the century, and there is some doubt whether Dickens, being dead, is still relevant for late-century readers who need instruction in life which, later critics feel, has changed much since his time.

Dickens's reputation as a humorist, or as a comic writer generally, often influences the kinds of effects reviewers are willing to attribute to his works. Because he is a comic writer, some critics posit insignificant effects, while others continue to claim those kinds of effects which have been traditionally associated with various forms of comedy - satire leads to reform, humour encourages love, and so on. His comedy is variously said to be the cause of his successes as well as his failures as a literary artist.

After Dickens's death, the antagonistic critics attempt to destroy his reputation, and a favourite target is his morality. The Old and New

Magazine (November 1871, p.483) strikes a pose that is frequently seen throughout Dickens's career, when it says "The moral influence of a novelist depends mainly on his success in presenting heroism, sanctity, delicate honor, enlightened philanthropy, and the union of high intellectual and religious culture in such beautiful embodiments as fix his readers' attention and win their hearts." Dickens's failure to satisfy these demands, the critic says, results from his sentimentality rather than his humour, but it has been a common tendency for reviewers in the past to point out that Dickens's comedy is true to the lower classes of society and to odd and eccentric human types rather than to exalted personages. It is felt that he cannot even portray a gentleman or an aristocrat because he seems to know little of them. Moreover, such "low" characters are typical of a certain kind of comedy, as some of Shakespeare's comic scenes show. Because Dickens does not - indeed cannot - portray exalted personages, it is said that he cannot teach noble lessons to his readers. He is felt to be fit for domestic novels and not for the satisfaction of philosophical and religious ideals. Reviewers constantly point out that he has no highly intelligent or religious natures in his works, but creates emotional, practical, homely characters. As Mrs. Oliphant says, in Blackwood's Magazine (June 1871, p.681), Dickens is, in Pickwick Papers, his most original novel, "humanly, not sacredly, profane." He displays no "moral sense" and portrays no "human excellence." Only in Dick Swiveller and Mr. Micawber, amongst all the characters of the novels, does Mrs. Oliphant find any admirable moral content, and in these characters it is due to the agency of the humour. Generally, Dickens's humour is more "fun" than anything else, but these two characters succeed. In Dick Swiveller,"For the first time, Mr. Dickens goes direct to the heart; and he does so in one of the highest and most difficult ways, - not by tears but by laughter." Dick

touches us, she says (p.685), much more than Little Nell does. Micawber's superiority as a comic creation is explained (p.686) by comparing him to Skimpole. In Micawber, "humour has helped humanity" and we see the character's goodness as well as his faults. In Skimpole, there is no humour and Mrs. Oliphant is more struck by his immorality than by the truthfulness of the character. Humour allows the reader to relax and see the truthfulness of the characterisation,[43] but humour is not present in Skimpole. In most cases, however, Dickens does not give his readers any moral lead. Though this is true of Pickwick Papers in particular, it is also true of Nicholas Nickleby, in which Mrs. Oliphant finds (p.683) "gay malice (not maliciousness)" in Dickens's portrayals of ridiculous characters and events. Dickens, that is, is too busy laughing at his creations to give his readers guidance, and if he does not laugh cynically at them, nor does he laugh lovingly. This whole discussion rests on two bases. One is that humour is a higher comic form because it involves truth and love, and the other is that Dickens is too funny to be a sound moral teacher. Even in his satire he fails, she says (p.695), because he is "never bitter." Despite his occasional "impressive rage," he never falls upon the objects of his raillery "with sharp disdain and loathing, as a thing ruinous and pernicious within." Failing as a humorist and satirist, Dickens only has "fun" left to him, and although Mrs. Oliphant does find some benefit in this, what she says indicates the level to which she attempts to reduce Dickens as a comic novelist: the fun of Pickwick Papers, she says (p.681), appeals to the schoolboy and to "the wearied man, who has had enough of serious life and to whom it is a relief to escape into this curious world, where all is fun, and nothing is serious." Dickens creates "with the most graphic and vivid clearness almost every grade of the species Fool," she says (p.675), but "among all these he has never once stumbled upon the simple, true, ideal woman, or any noble type of man." But rather than use this

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[43] cf. Gissing below, p.181.

realisation as the springboard for an analysis of the comic characters, Mrs. Oliphant blames Dickens for not being able to create a hero or heroine of noble mien and high stature.

I have spent some time considering her criticism because it combines many of the arguments of other adverse critics. The feeling, that Dickens is too funny to have any deep or lasting effect is shared by the Dublin Review (April 1871, pp.324-25). He "will make a few generations to come laugh," the reviewer says, because his humour will always appeal to the liking for "oddities and eccentricities inherent in human nature." But this is a superficial kind of humour and, unlike Thackeray's it teaches its readers little about human nature. It is rather "merely quite delightful" and is felt more and more as a relief to the "growing weariness of life." This feeling, that there is some value in mere amusement, here relegates Dickens's comedy to a low level, but in some critics' eyes, the power to amuse has a higher status. Andrew Lang, in Good Words (April 1888, p.233) finds some value in it, when he says that Dickens's "great good deed" is "to have made us laugh so frequently, so inextinguishably, so kindly," and Hunt (1887, p.460) finds this effect particularly valuable because, in the literature around the 1880s and 1890s, the "despondent philosophy" is so widespread, and he feels that "men must have revealed to them the lighter side of life lest they be discouraged." Dickens's aim as a writer was, Hunt says, the same as it was in private life, "to make the world around him somewhat cheerier by his presence and effort." Clement Shorter, in Victorian Fiction (1897, p.43) adds that although for some, Dickens no longer serves any purpose, there are still many, "as there were in the fifties and sixties," who have found his writings useful as an "aid to cheery optimism." In the new century, Swinburne, discussing Mrs. Gamp in the Quarterly Review (July 1902, p.24), acknowledges "with infinite thanksgiving of inexhaust-

ible laughter and of rapturous admiration" the greatest "comic poet" who ever lived "to make the life of other men more bright and more glad and more perfect than ever, without his beneficent influence, it possibly or imaginably could have been." More simply, W.E. Henley (1902, p.8) feels that Dickens did more to make his readers "happy and amiable" than any other writer of his time. Margaret Baillie-Saunders, in The Philosophy of Dickens (1905, p.34) speaks of his "mission of fun" to brighten up the England of his day which was a dreary place, but Chesterton (1906, pp.21-22) does not like this emphasis on mere cheerfulness, as I shall show later. He says that Dickens and the earlier Victorians had a different philosophy based in a "sense of infinite opportunity and boisterous brotherhood" which new-century men do not understand, but could do with because they are so morbid and depressed.[44] All of these comments admire Dickens's power to amuse because such a simple effect is needed late in the century or because critics feel that Dickens managed to brighten up a dull world. Very close is the idea that Dickens helped to make people happier by bettering their lot through his campaign for active reform. The effectiveness of his satire is, as I shall show, still believed in.

But most critics, for or against Dickens, expect more than mere amusement, and his comedy is sometimes seen to stand in the way of more useful effects. His ineffectiveness as a moralist is blamed on his comedy by the Old and New Magazine (April 1871, p.481). Dickens, according to the critic, "is too great a humorist to be a perfect moralist. He makes his characters so funny that we laugh at the good and bad indiscriminately, and are much too amused to praise or blame as we should." We are blinded to the wickedness and meanness of some of his characters by the "excessive

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[44] For a similar emphasis, see also Gissing (1902, p.202) and Lang, Fortnightly Review (December 1898, p.946).

brightness of his wit." The Dublin Review (April 1871, p.336) posits a number of typical reasons for the failure of Dickens's satire when it says that "the social questions which he illustrates are treated with more zeal than knowledge," and "he deals too largely in the picturesque[45] to be regarded as a public instructor on all or any of his topics." Hard Times, the reviewer says, is amusing and clever, but Dickens "exaggerated out of all practical utility as an example the Gradgrind system." The neat irony of this last gibe is no doubt intentional, but the dual charge of ignorance and exaggeration is widespread in adverse criticisms of his morality and satire. Leslie Stephen, in the Dictionary of National Biography (1888,pp.929,931), claims that Dickens seems to have believed that "every dissenting minister was a Stiggins," and later satires evidence no more insight than his early ones. James Oliphant (1899, pp.36-37) says that the satire of the Poor Law, in Oliver Twist, shows Dickens's ignorance. Anything that was not truthful is naturally felt to have been ineffective. Graham (1897, p.17) repeats substantially the objection of some earlier critics[46] when he says that the remedies Dickens suggested for social abuses were futile. He adds that if modern readers take his works to be historically accurate portrayals of the conditions of his time, they are likely to be misled. Lord, in the Nineteenth Century (November 1903, p.776), even more energetically protests against an example of Dickens's false teaching. He could have done "nothing but harm" because of his continual preaching on the basis of the line "A man's a man for a' that." Eugene Wrayburn, in marrying Lizzie Hexam would, Lord says, be socially ruined by his marriage, because gentility is not, whatever Dickens says, found in the gutter. Burns's

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[45] This term does not refer solely to the comic, but seems nevertheless to include it.

[46] For example, p.161 above.

text, Lord says, has "debauched the minds of three generations of Britons." Dickens's inability to portray gentlemen leads him to his error, and Lord is one of the many who make this charge. But since it is usually felt to be a matter of his ignorance of the higher classes of society, I shall discuss it in the next chapter.

For those who find that the satire of the novels is misleading, it is almost a relief - although it is the means of a further attack on Dickens - to find that it was also ineffective. James Oliphant, quoted above, says that fortunately the Poor Law satire was not effective, and the London Quarterly Review (January 1871, finding (p.267) no love but only a pity "little more than kin to contempt" in Dickens's characterisation, suggests (p.271) that the low comedy of the characters expresses and encourages "the individual man's indomitable vanity and self-love - the pleasure he has in feeling that he is superior to other people." The right kind of moral teaching is absent. The reviewer adds (p.272) that Dickens's fiction lacks "that deep truth and earnestness that carries a fictitious life-lesson home to the man or woman to whom it is most appropriate" and causes readers to "steer clear of a great quicksand of offence." Dickens inspires vulgar laughter, but he achieves no deep, powerful moral instruction because he is more a popular comedian and caricaturist than a moralist.

Yet if, as another adverse critic, George Bentley,[47] says, in the Temple Bar Magazine (May 1873, p.171), Dickens is a humorist who was flattered and who flattered himself into the belief that he was also a great moralist, perhaps it was not mere flattery, because many critics even in this later period, agree with Robert Carruthers (1879, p.521) that Dickens was "a public instructor, a reformer, a moralist" as well as a humorist. Carruthers seems to see humour, however, as a source of amusement, which indicates that, as in previous periods, the comic is

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[47] Bentley has, of course, a family grievance against Dickens.

often played down in favour of the moral or practical ends that are said to underlie it. Arnold Quamoclit, in St. James's Magazine (April 1879, p.288), speaking of Dickens as a "humaniser," says that "whilst cheerfulness and mirth overspread the pages at which we are looking, there is underneath the whole a vein of genuine sympathy, an under-current of moral devotion and tender solicitude and love." That is, he finds in Dickens the love and sympathy that Mrs. Oliphant and the writer in the London Quarterly Review claim is absent. Both tradition and probably the majority of late-century critics are on the side represented by Quamoclit, although some of those who paint Dickens as the cheerful domestic novelist who exudes love for his fellowmen share the adverse critics' low assessment of his stature.[48]

The importance of love and sympathy is evident in a number of critical comments. Buchanan, in St. Paul's Magazine (February 1872, p.145) stresses them when he says that once the genial humorist has presented a character to us in a "funny light," hate for that figure is impossible. Humour and love are twin brothers, and Dickens has done much for human nature merely by "pointing out what is odd in it." Buchanan enthuses further: "Here come Hypocrisy, Guile, Envy, Self-conceit; you are ready to spring upon them and rend them; yet when the charm is spoken, you burst out laughing. What comical figures! You couldn't think of hurting them! Your heart begins to swell with sneaking kindness. Poor devils, they were made thus . . .," and so on. The stern moralists would say that the satire is ineffective, but Buchanan finds merit in the comic writer's supposed mercy. Love and sympathy are also important in Harrison's judgement, in Forum (January 1895, p.546). He says that "No waif and stray was so repulsive, no drudge was so mean, no criminal was so atrocious, but what Charles Dickens could feel for him some ray

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[48] See Edward Dowden, Transcripts and Studies 2nd ed., (1896), pp.167-68.

of sympathy, or extract some pathetic mirth out of his abject state." Harrison then goes on to quote Thackeray's statement about the humorist's awakening the reader's love, pity, kindness, and so on.[49]

Forster stresses the emotions often in his discussions of the lessons Dickens teaches,[50] but his most important statement occurs within his defence of Dickens's exaggeration, when he talks (Life, II p.273) of the power of humour to discover "the affinities between the high and the low, the attractive and the repulsive, the rarest things and things of every day, which bring us all on the level of a common humanity." It is the property, Forster says, which Carlyle calls "inverse sublimity," because it has the power of "exalting into our affections what is below us" just as sublimity "draws down into our affections what is above us." This is what Harrison is speaking of too, and the idea has a social bias. Dickens is pre-eminently the delineator of lower class life and paupers and especially of eccentric, out-of-the-way types. Through his humour, he teaches benevolence and kindness towards them. A.W. Ward (1882, p.223) has a similar emphasis. He says that "the most observing and the most imaginative of our English humorists revealed to us that infinite multitude of associations which binds men together, and makes us members of one another." Dickens's loving humour and sympathy combines, that is, with accurate observation and imagination to produce his particular kind of fiction. Ward pays lip-service to imagination here, because it is the reality of the social and human portraits that matters. The characters are felt to be human and a natural corollary is that they must have been observed by the author. The feeling of humanity in Dickens's comedy

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49 See above, p.11.

50 See, for example, Life I pp.90, 97, 124; II pp.30, 116, 288.

prompts W.B. Rands, in the Contemporary Review (July 1880, pp.171-76), to argue that humour is a "kindly leveller" which takes down men's pride and points up their common weaknesses in a spirit of cheerfulness and love. He protests against Sydney Smith and Shelley who had doubted the power of comedy as a moral agent because it obscures the moral lesson. Certainly the "rough edge" of evil is taken off, he says, but there is so much love and beneficence in Dickens's humour that it cannot fail as a moral force.

All this claims much more for humour, and for comic art in general, than do those who dismiss it as exaggerated caricature. The kinds of effects seen to be typical of the humorist are, of course, linked to expectations held of humour, and the humorist and moralist are often said to be one. For those, like G.B. Smith, in the Gentleman's Magazine (March 1874, pp.305-6), who harbour a suspicion either that Dickens merely amuses in his comic passages, or that comedy itself is incapable of serious effects, Dickens is, beneath his "rich humour," a "moral teacher" and "moral regenerator," and those who believe that he merely amuses are, in fact, "guilty of an egregious mistake.[51]" Much depends on whether "humour" is a special kind of comedy carrying love and sympathy with it, or whether "humour" is merely a term for the comic and may carry the connotation of lack of seriousness. Smith seems to use it as a general term and then has to show that Dickens is also "serious," and Albert Canning, in The Philosophy of Dickens (1880, p.18), appears to hold a similar view, because he says that Dickens "first charms his readers by his wit, fun and humour," then, "before the most captious critic can call him frivolous," he describes truthful scenes of woe and misery which "impress all thoughtful minds with irresistible power." The different kinds of comedy, which

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[51] See Chambers's Cyclopaedia of English Literature (vol.2, 1879, p.521) for a similar approach.

Canning does not further distinguish between, are merely a kind of bait to attract the attention of those who need to be taught to reflect. And once Dickens had caught his audience's attention he did not rely so much on his humour, which is reduced (p.326), in the later novels, to the function of merely diverting readers amidst the "more serious thoughts and emotions they engender."

Gissing (1902) in part agrees with Canning, since he sees (p.197) that Dickens's most earnest moral purposes depended for their furtherance on the genial power of humour. Humour made him popular, maintained his huge audience, and "only because they laughed with him so heartily, did multitudes of people turn to discussing the question his page suggested." Far from obscuring the moral, the comedy of the novels often helps make it clear and acceptable, Gissing shows (pp.201-2), as he recounts the scene in which Sally Brass feeds the Marchioness on two square inches of cold mutton and bids her never to say she had not had meat in that house. He claims that the humour of the scene makes acceptable what would otherwise have been unendurable realism. The two square inches of mutton, he says, is "the secret of Dickens's power for good." It is also in evidence when Judy Smallweed maltreats Charley in Bleak House. "After the merriment," Gissing says, "comes the thought," and "henceforth the reader thinks sympathetically of poor little girls, whether ruled by vicious trollops or working under easier conditions." Without the humour, the story becomes "too unpleasant to remember." Gissing chooses his examples well and discusses them intelligently, but there is no great difference between his ideas here and those advanced, for example, by Horne.[52] The comedy serves the function of softening unpleasant reality and making it more palatable to the fastidious or impressionable reader.

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[52] See above, p. 144. Horne says the humour of Dickens's treatment of Fagin makes the scenes acceptable , for example.

Gissing had spoken of this earlier (p.86) during his chapter on "Art, Veracity, and Moral Purpose." The idea of a novelist not wishing to offend his public, Gissing says (p.74), is irritating to late-century artists and critics, but he stresses Dickens's oneness with his public in an era that had different ideas about the morality of art. Dickens did not aim to shock his readers because he would probably have lost them, and in this he is unlike some of the novelists of the 1880s and 1890s who desire freedom to offend the public. Instead of blaming Dickens, critics should attempt to understand his methods in terms of his artistic and social background. If Dickens seems untruthful and prudish, it was his public that made him so, but it also made him a better artist because he had to heighten reality. In this heightening process, Gissing shows, Dickens's humour often plays an important role. The feeling that readers need to be protected from disgusting details in fiction, though more typical of the early years of Dickens's career, does not disappear from English criticism, and Realistic and Naturalistic novels are strongly objected to in the 1880s and 1890s[53] largely because the details they contain are felt to be repulsive and unnecessarily highlighted.

To modern critics - and to some people in the 1880s and 1890s - this attitude is hard to understand, but its survival throughout the nineteenth century ensures that Dickens's humorous (and other) softening of repulsive characters and scenes remain popular. Samuel Davey (1876, p.130) illustrates such a reaction to it when he says, "If he introduces into some of his worst characters the humour and foibles of our better nature, it is to prevent us from degenerating into 'the heart poison of contempt and hatred,' that we may pity more than we despise them."

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[53] W.C. Frierson, "The English Controversy over Realism in Fiction 1885 - 1895." PMLA (June 1928, pp.533-50).

The emphasis is similar to that of Buchanan, quoted above,[54] and the statements of this kind show that if the critics like their morality strong, they also like it sweet, and the comedy of the novels is seen to play an important role in ensuring that the moral teaching is not offensive. Swinburne, in the Quarterly Review (July 1902, p.22) gives this idea more of an "aesthetic" turn when he praises the creation of Miss Miggs and says that it is an "unsurpassable triumph of dramatic humour" that malignity is made so delightful and enchanting. He repeats the praise in his discussions, in subsequent pages of the article, of Dicken's villains and ruffians." Modern criticism may be in sympathy with Swinburne's emphasis on art rather than morality, but the concern for the underlying morality of Dickens's art is understandable in an age in which a statement like Swinburne's is a novelty. Late-century critics frequently do not find more than mere moral purpose in Dickens's art, and they chide him for it. R. Brimley Johnson, in the Book Monthly (1906, pp.235-39), sees criticism of Dickens recovering from the aestheticism which dismissed him as a bad artist, and finds value still in the "humanity" which informs his pages. He also finds an artistic excellence that others had missed. Dickens has his faults, but these must be played down or ignored in favour of his excellences.

For some, indeed, the faults become virtues. His exaggeration, for example, is said by Margaret Baillie-Saunders (1905, pp.32-33), to have been deliberately used to pierce the dullness of his readers. Victorians were, she suggests, dullards who needed unsophisticated art to make them sit up and take notice of Dickens's messages. His laughter was effective where "agitator, socialist and missioner" had been ineffective. Or, as Davey (1876, p.123) puts it, "He has laughed down abuses

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54 p.178.

where crying and preaching had been of little avail." The belief in the power of the satirist which had earlier caused so much praise for and opposition to his works, lasts through the generation after his death, as critics who do not necessarily believe that a satirist might enjoy such success in their time, are willing to believe that Dickens was a powerful influence on public opinion and on the law-makers in his own time. Forster's Life gives a lead in this direction, because he frequently comments on the effectiveness of the satires in individual novels. Some of the comments are lifted from earlier Examiner reviews, but Forster, as one who lived through the years when Dickens's moral teaching was felt to be most immediate because the writer was alive and in communication with his readers through his books, naturally retains a sense of the practical usefulness of the comedy. His comments are too numerous for discussion, but they include references to Pecksniff and Mrs. Gamp (Life I, pp,293, 296, 297), the Blimber satire in Dombey and Son (II, p.30), Stareleigh (II p.100), Micawber and Skimpole (II, p.104) and he says (II, p.288) that the satire in Great Expectations "that enforces the old warning against living upon vague hopes . . . never presented itself in a more amusing or kindly shape." Davey (1876) comments several times on Dickens's successful satires. Discussing Mrs. Gamp (p.140), he says that Dickens has "done a good service in helping to put this race of vampires out of existence." Davey places him "in the first rank of social reformers," saying (p.150) that the early novels in particular "have re-acted for good upon the national mind." He claims that Dickens "helped sweep away" the Fleet and Marshalsea prisons and the Yorkshire Schools, and that Chancery Reform was due to his influence. He did not abolish the workhouse system, but the suggestion is that since it still exists in 1876, it was probably too much for a single novelist to conquer. The Scottish Review (December 1883, p.130) says, with similar enthusiasm, "One has only to name 'Bumble' to call up memories of abuses and oppressions which the creation of that

good-for-nothing old noodle abolished," and the writer notes several other effective satires. Mrs. Gamp, for example, has been followed by a revolution in hospital nursing, and the creation of Mrs. Jellyby caused one lady who had made herself "the friend of the African," to abandon her mission. Percy Fitzgerald, in Bozland: Dickens's Places and People (1895, p.237)," makes a long list of the subjects of the satires and says that in all of them the novelist was instrumental either directly in bringing about reform, or indirectly by rousing public opinion. Edwin Chancellor, in Literary Types (1895, p.152), boldly says that Dickens "set himself to bring to ridicule . . . the defects which were so characteristic of most public business in his time" in "nearly everything he wrote." The novels were aimed at either topical abuses or the failings of individuals, and he adds (pp.153-54) that "Dickens looked upon the novel as Moliere did the drama, as a lay-pulpit from which all sham and falsity ought to be denounced and ridiculed, and he is probably the only writer, with the exception of Thackeray, who . . . made as equally potent an instrument of the novel as the great Frenchman did of the stage."

There seems, in many such statements, to be a loss of awareness of the comic, but in some criticisms there is a naive belief in the power of laughter. Chancellor (p.152) says that "nothing brings about reform like ridicule," and Margaret Baillie-Saunders (1905, pp.34,36) believes that even his "fun" had similar results. Dickens, she says, "had a mission of fun", but it was also "fun with a mission." Having been poor and miserable himself, Dickens was able to teach his country "to know its own poor and to see their humour and their pathos for itself.[55]" Again, it is assumed that the comic fiction is true to life -

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[55] Such criticism is common after the revelations made, in Forster's Life, about Dicken's boyhood misery.

that if there are comic characters in the novels, Dickens probably observed them in the real world during his early life or at some later date. This argument for truthfulness is the corollary of the argument for the effectiveness of the fiction, and the critic continues to say that Dickens achieved what agitator, socialist and missioner had failed in - "to set that picture plainly before the public eye." But Dickens did more than just increase public awareness of poverty, it seems, for Mrs. Baillie-Saunders later says that he "got at" the "great law-makers in the land, by the most golden of all golden keys - laughter." Amidst all this enthusiasm, it is almost refreshing to find the adverse critic in the London Quarterly Review (January 1871, pp.275-76) sarcastically remarking that Dickens had very little to do with reforms in his day - about as much, the reviewer says, as the author of Uncle Tom's Cabin had to do with the abolition of slavery. Sensibly, St. John Topp, in the Melbourne Review (July 1881, p.277) says, with a little more caution, that Dickens directed public attention to a number of abuses and "so far . . . assisted in remedying them." And even more sensibly, R. Brimley Johnson says, in the Book Monthly (1906, p.238), that "the direct influence towards social reform" of the novels "must not, of course, be reckoned to his credit as an artist." Johnson's caution is caused by his awareness of the cry for "art for art's sake" which he protests against, but there is no real evidence that critics did see Dickens as a better artist because of his reformist influence. When the subject of reform or morality appeared, they often stopped talking about art and spoke of the artist as a private or public figure who was, or was not, doing good. Johnson himself illustrates this when he says that Dickens's "final appeal was to first principles, the hatred of justice or hypocrisy, the love of the beautiful and the good." Nevertheless, it must be noted that he feels caution is still, in 1906, needed on the question of the effectiveness of the satire, and a glance at the comments of some critics shows why.

Almost all critics who discuss Dickens make some mention of his moral teaching and his satires. A.W. Ward (1882) is a typical example of the mixture of caution and adventure with which the effectivensss of the satire is often treated. He comments on it, novel by novel, in a rather tiresome fashion, and says (p.35) that the exposure of the Yorkshire Schools "did good in its way," but Squeers has survived in some forms. The satires of Mrs. Gamp (p.56) and of the Circumlocution Office (p.135) have been more effective, and even the description of the privations of the Marchioness, he says (p.43), "have possibly had a result which would have been that most coveted by Dickens - that of helping towards the better treatment of a class whose lot is among the dust and ashes . . . of many households." When Ward balances comedy and morality, he does so in a simple way which is typical of ordinary Victorian critical statements on the mixture of the two elements in Dickens's work. Speaking (p.58) of Mr. Pecksniff, he says "Comic art has never more successfully fulfilled its highest task after its truest fashion than in this picture of the rise and fall of a creature, who never ceases to be laughable, and yet never ceases to be loathsome." Gissing (1902), too, has a lot to say - intermittently - about the satire of the novels, and he has a whole chapter on "Satiric Portraiture." Speaking (p.133) of the blend of "jocosity and horror" in Dotheboys, he claims that because Dickens was still young he made the Squeers family a little too funny, but he says "nothing could have been practically more effectual," nevertheless. The educational satire in general "helped on the better day," he claims (p.135), but Gissing prefers to discuss the significance and credibility of the characters rather than the social or political effects of the satires. This is no doubt because of his idea that Dickens's answer to social evils was "for the most part, private benevolence"(p.251). Dickens, he says (p.259) struck great blows "for

the cause of humanity in his day and generation," but he does not make sweeping claims for the satires.

Most critics accept that Dickens was a successful moralist and reformer in his day, but many find that his humanitarianism and philanthropy are out of tune with their own period. As I showed earlier, however, there are those who find the cheerfulness of his novels and his ability to cause laughter, valuable. Saintsbury (1895, p.131) speaks of his amiable optimist life-philosophy in a disparaging tone, and the realists and pessimists of later years find it inadequate as a solution for their doubts and problems. Cross (1899, p.189) finds that Mark Tapley expresses Dickens's philosophy of life reduced to its lowest terms: Be jolly." Clearly, something was needed to rouse criticism from the postulation of such simplistic theories. It reaches its highest expression in the period under survey in Chesterton's work, but a prefiguring of his ideas may be seen in W.B. Rands's essay, "From Faust to Mr. Pickwick," in the Contemporary Review (July 1880). He refers (p.166) to the "new fatalism" and the "Pessimism" and the "Evolutionary Determinism" typical of his time, and says (pp.167-68) that there are three things which may be opposed to "Fate." These are "the sense of Beauty, upon which all forms of Art are founded," the Heroic Sense - that which is appealed to in tragedy and pathetic story, and the "sense of Humour, which is not less potent." Dickens illustrates the use of the latter. In Pickwick Papers, he makes his hero "so often ridiculous, yet never contemptible," and Rands says (p.170) that it "was a work of the finest art" to do so. The philosophy of life and the morality of the novel are said (p.171) to be "conventional" and unintellectual', but the burden of fate is solved in the novel by the presence of the child-like, innocent Mr. Pickwick. Once or twice,

Mr. Pickwick speaks like a man of the world, but in general he is as unworldly and trusting as a child (p.168). What the novel shows us, according to Rands (p.173), is that somehow "we must become as little children, and take life as it comes, before we can be reconciled to ourselves. We must be helped to feel as at heart beneficent the paradox created by the conflict of conscience and free-will on the one hand and the seeming fatality of character and circumstances on the other." A great humorist like Dickens may do the latter for us as well as a great poet like Goethe, Rands claims, and he adds, "he may sometimes do it better, especially in times like ours, when the head has threatened and still threatens to be too much for the heart, and too many of our best and wisest barely escape the taint of cynicism." Rands says (p.174) that men no longer find in literature, art or society the gaiety that once existed, and Pickwick Papers "must take its place among the beneficent books that help to make life intelligible to us in days when we ask too many questions" and take refuge in morbid art and literature. And he concludes his article (p.176) by saying that humour has in it love of mankind, and an enjoyment of life based on faith in its "values and purposes."

Rands is one of the few critics who, looking steadily at Dickens's humour, rather than past it to more "serious" concerns, finds value in it for its own powers and does not push the comic into the background as he talks of moral and philosophical matters. Another such critic is Chesterton (1906). It is noticeable that Rands discusses only Pickwick Papers, and Chesterton, like many other critics, finds the early novels most valuable. The later novels are less susceptible to the kind of argument for happiness, optimism and so on that such critics put forward. But Rands wrote in 1880, and there were a number of subsequent critics who claimed no more than "cheery optimism" for him. The comic novelist is

seen as a lightweight philosopher if as a philosopher at all, and Chesterton feels the need to do battle with such an opinion.

One gibe of those who call Dickens a cheerful optimist is that his satire is ineffective, and Chesterton goes to great lengths to prove that it was effective. Like others before him,he argues (p.208) that the exaggeration draws people's attention to abuses and creates the desire for their destruction. In giving everyone an interest in Bumble's or Mrs. Gamp's (literary) existence, he claims, Dickens gave them an interest in the (worldly) destruction of the evil. Therefore, he says, Dickens "did definitely destroy - or at the very least help to destroy - certain institutions." Earlier(p.200) he says "Dickens did help pull down the debtors' prisons . . . [he] did drive Squeers out of his Yorkshire den . . . [he] did leave his mark on parochialism, on nursing, on funerals, on public executions, on workhouses, on the Court of Chancery. These things were altered; they are different." Dickens "played a solid and quite demonstrable part" in getting things done. Chesterton scores points off the Realists and sociologists of his time, and says (p.208) that if Dickens had painted reality the way the former do,he would have succeeded only in boring his readers, but in creating interesting art by means of his exaggeration, he was much more effective - more effective, indeed, than the modern sociologists, he adds (p.200),who "cannot get anything done at all." If Dickens was the sentimental, impractical optimist that people say he was, then he was also "uncommonly active and useful." He is unfair to the moderns of course, and takes no account of the fact that the time was right for a humanitarian and reformist novelist to do his work, but his main aim - as it is throughout his work - is to prove the superiority of the optimist over the pessimist, and Gissing is a favourite representative of the moderns. The optimist is a better reformer than the pessimist because, according to Chesterton, the optimist

believes that life is valuable and that men are interesting enough to be worth saving. The pessimist takes a dark view of life and cannot see the blackness of evil against the background, but to the optimist life is colourful, and evil stands out as a blot on the background - a blot which must be removed. Dickens as an optimist creates, in his novels, a joyful world which is threatened by evil, and he gives his readers an interest in the removal of evil from the world. The pessimist paints such a world that the evil is difficult to discern and he only succeeds in conveying his own fatalism. Thus, Chesterton says (p.13),"Dickens, the optimist, satirizes the Fleet, and the Fleet is gone. Gissing, the pessimist, satirizes Suburbia, and Suburbia remains."

On the other hand, he needs to prove that Dickens is still valuable, and his discussion of other satires shows this. Dickens did not, he says (p.53), succeed in destroying the Barnacles. There are those who say that he was successful because the abuse does not exist, but Chesterton claims that "England is still ruled by the Barnacle family," and his description of an evil is still valid. In one of his seeming-digressions about modern politics, he says later (pp.115-16) that the caricature of America is not just that, because it is an attack on patriotism, and England's patriotism of the present day is just as blind, foolish, complacent and dangerous as the patriotism embodied in the Chollops and Jefferson Bricks of the novel. All of this is bound up with the question of Dickens's truthfulness, as are most of Chesterton's arguments, but the truthfulness of Dickens's comic art is what makes it effective.

But he does not merely discuss the satire. Dickens's work rests on two propositions. One is that all men are comic (p.182), and the other is that all men are interesting (p.183). These two ideas are very closely related, but ultimately it depends on the writer's approach to life.

All men, from another point of view, are tragic, and tragedy leads to a "profound sense of human dignity," but comedy leads to a "delightful sense of human variety." Dickens is a comic writer and therefore he sees all men as being both "wildly interesting and wildly varied" (p.184), and he loves men for it. The idea of love, so common in criticism of Dicken's comedy, makes a reappearance in Chesterton's work, but it has undergone a transformation. Chesterton does not see Dickens as a sentimentalist or a lover of his kind, but as a lover of the variety of mankind. He delights in them and his imagination recreates their individualities. In saying this, Chesterton is halfway between saying that Dickens's imagination heightens reality and saying that he describes the oddities he finds in life. As I showed at the end of the previous chapter,[56] he believes in both possibilities, but essentially it is a matter of vision, and the great comic writer, because of his imagination, can find, it seems, materials for his art where others only see ordinary reality. The comic imagination is therefore a distinctly personal power, and I shall therefore discuss it in the next chapter.

Chesterton avoids calling Dickens an emotional kind of comic writer, but he does not claim that Dickens satis fies the intellect as some critics had demanded. His interest, he says (pp.189-90) was in character, and his characters do not charm with their intellects, they charm with themselves. All of the great characters of Dickens are, he says, "great fools," and in being thus they are not below wisdom but above it. They do not appear in intellectual or high class society, they are mostly to be found among the poor. As an example of this, Chesterton takes Toots. Dickens, he says (p.192), paints Toots as he is in the world - in short, a fool in the ordinary sense of the word, - but he affects his readers so that they admire him. Toots, he says (p.193)" expresses certain permanent dignities in human nature more than any of Dickens's more

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[56] p. 117.

dignified characters can do it." Great artists "always choose great fools rather than great intellectuals to embody humanity." The intellectual is superior to the majority of mankind, but the fool is typical. Yet, as well as being typical, he is also interesting and he is different from other men. The intellectuals and cultivated characters in Dickens are all the same and they are all boring. The fools are all different and all interesting. There is, he says (pp.193-94), an apostolic injunction to "suffer fools gladly." We usually stress the word "suffer," but Dickens shows that we ought to stress the word "gladly." We should delight in the characters that we would usually pass by. Thus, "if we are to look for lessons," - and Chesterton does not seem to be sure that we should - the "last and deepest lesson of Dickens" is that it is in our own daily life, in the ordinary rather than the extraordinary, that we should "look for the portents and the prodigies." "Every day we are missing a monster whom we might easily love, and an imbecile whom we should certainly admire."

Chesterton, of course, looks at only one side of the question. There is no reason why, for example, intellectuals should not be as interesting as fools, but Chesterton deliberately champions Dickens and is unfair to other writers. Moreover, he deliberately picks out minor characters such as Toots because he wishes to emphasise the comic aspects of Dickens's art. The most popular characters for discussion in other criticisms seem to be Mrs. Gamp and Mr. Pecksniff. These characters appear time and again, but are linked strongly to Dickens's social and moral purpose. Chesterton tends to speak more of the lesser characters in order to be able to stress that it is the weakest part of Dickens - that is, what others have felt to be his weakest part - that is in fact the strongest. The "farcicaloccultism" he speaks of (p.23) is more important than any moral teaching. His "insane humour," he says (p.179),

was the product of the great Dickens, the Dickens who was superior to the "industrious" and the "public-spirited" Dickens. Farce is often linked by Chesterton to joy and gaiety, and the central point about his argument for the Christmas Dickens (chapter 7) is that the Spirits of the Past, Present and Future in A Christmas Carol are "High Spirits" and are linked therefore by Chesterton (p.131) to joy, and thence back to the comic Dickens. Both the first Christmas Book and the second, The Chimes, are he says, appeals for "charity and mirth." Like Gissing, he feels that humour and charity are close, and he speaks of Dickens's power for reform because he was at one with the people, but he finds it much more important (p.189) that Dickens's great characters amuse than that they instruct. Life was both laughable and livable. But in laughing, Dickens shows that characters like Toots are interesting and so, in a way, teaches a "lesson." Dickens's art, like all great art, has significance for the world that readers know, but it is not really reducible to "lessons." What Chesterton asks for, in short, is an enjoyment of Dickens's enjoyment of the world. Perhaps this may teach readers to find joy in the world, but at least Chesterton hopes they will find joy in Dickens.

His argument is long and complex, and it is impossible to do his book justice here. What is important about it is that even if the argument seems contradictory and illogical, it is on the whole sensible, and Chesterton finds value in the comic aspects of Dickens's art above all other aspects.

Conclusion

The moral and practical bent of criticism of Dickens's fiction is undeniable. His comedy is searched for its possible moral lesson or application to life. After Dickens's death, "philosophical" demands are

made of the novel by critics in increasing numbers, but Dickens's position as a sentimental moralist and public reformer is settled. His humour continues to be seen as a vehicle for his love and compassion, and his satire as the instrument of exposure and amendment of abuses. Beyond these effects, achieved in times when it was easier to be such a novelist, some later critics believe he is incapable of more.

Early critics are unashamed in their moral emphasis and believe that comic fiction is not merely to be laughed at. It must serve some purpose. Gradually during the century there is a change of approach. Partly caused by those who believe that Dickens is fit for no more, there is a movement towards seeing him as one who can cheer his readers up because of his tendency to look on the sunny side of life. At times this is tantamount to the kind of opinion rejected by Dickens's earlier defenders, that he is valuable for his mere "fun," and later critics, while some still stress the moral and practical effects, attempt to find some kind of "philosophy" in Dickens. The most successful of these are the attempts like those of Rands and Chesterton which see Dickens's comedy not merely as an escape or relief from the prevailing fatalism in literature but as a positive alternative to it. Comedy itself seems to "come of age" in such a situation. It is not seen merely as a vehicle for "serious" concerns, not as the bait that catches the reader's attention so that he may then be edified, and not as the mere softening power which allows repulsive scenes and characters to be portrayed to a fastidious public. Instead of showing that the comic writer could also have "serious" (i.e. solemn) purposes - a tendency which offends the many who dislike writing with a purpose - comedy is stressed as a serious form of creative art. That is, comedy attains its own dignity instead of being attached to morality and social reform.

As a generalisation, that last statement may stand, but it does not really apply to satire, which is still seen as a practical and reform-orientated mode. Nor is Chesterton's kind of approach necessarily accepted by many others; but the possibility is now there. It may be noted that Chesterton does not often refer to Dickens as a humorist, but uses words like "farce" and "caricature" which suggest the comic above all else. Humour is close to charity and humanity, and although he believes Dickens has charity and humanity, he prefers to stress the comic - ultimately the poetry of comedy - above such secondary matters.

THE COMIC WRITER

Introduction

It is to be expected that readers should wish to learn something of the author who delights them, and that reviewers should attempt to supply them with details. The reviewers' information could come from a number of sources: personal acquaintance with the author, hearsay, biography, or from his works. None of these sources is wholly reliable, and the last of them is particularly apt to be misleading. Critics in the period have more faith in it than do modern critics, but their readings of Dickens's character are often based on more than one source of information. Some of them may have realised that he often creates personae rather than speaks always in his own person, but played along with him to save destroying the illusion. Often it is difficult to tell how naive a reviewer is or what the sources of his information are, but it is not my intention to consider these things. Instead, I wish to examine what kind of person the reviewers thought Dickens was.

What happens is that the literary is explained in personal terms, and causes for its merits and its defects are often said to lie in the author himself. There is little attention paid, for example, to literary convention, and because Dickens wrote to some extent to satisfy a taste for the sentimental, he seems to some of his critics to be over-sentimental himself. Forster's biography generally tends to reinforce the impression given by the novels that Dickens is kindly, genial, sympathetic, sometimes righteously angry, sometimes high-spirited, and so on. Its appearance, as well as the appearance of the first edition of the Letters (1880-82), tends to reinforce the feeling that Dickens is "in" his novels, that the work is an expression of the man.

One thing is assumed by most critics. Dickens is a man of "genius"

as opposed to one who merely has "talent," and there is great interest in genius in the period. Critics often consider what personal qualities cause Dickens's greatness and the particular nature of his art. Comic art especially seems to be felt to depend on personal sense of humour or ability to see the funny side of things. Frequently, too, it is claimed that Dickens must have had certain experiences or seen particular sights before he could write about them. Much attention is paid, therefore, to his powers of observation and his knowledge of some aspects of life. But his knowledge is felt to be limited, and the cry becomes stronger and stronger, in adverse criticism, that Dickens is no intellectual, that he is ignorant of some aspects of life and learning, and that his emotional and imaginative faculties dominate his mind. There seems to be a split in his critics between the rationalists, the highly educated, and the snobbish on one side, and on the other those who do not take so much pride in their educational background, who cultivate the feelings and who value Dickens for his love of the common man. The split is nowhere more clear than in the reaction to the comic aristocrats in the novels. Of course, it is unfair to divide his critics up in this way between two social or educational groups, but these groups are what opposing critics give the impression of representing. The first group becomes known as the "superfine" critics, and their influence, felt before Dickens's death, becomes very strong in the generation after his death. . But dismissal of Dickens as intellectually fitted for nothing more than a humorist begins as early as the reviews of American Notes. Especially in what critics deem his failures, his "qualifications" to write such works are scrutinised, and in general the conclusion is reached that Dickens is best in that kind of fiction - seen best in his early works - for which his personal nature and his experience of life fitted him. He is an uncultured genius with a great sense of humour, who writes spontaneously and for effect rather than for art.

The Early Reaction : 1836 - 1842

The early praise for Dickens's powers of observation illustrates the tendency of the reviewers to notice something in the novels and to explain it with reference to the author's character. Often it is difficult to tell whether the novelist's character or his work is being discussed because reviewers seek human qualities in the novels and give the author credit for them at the same time. This is illustrated by Lewes's comment in the National Magazine and Monthly Critic (December 1837, Collins p.65) that Dickens "should be compared to no one since no one has ever written like him - no one has ever combined the nicety of observation, the fineness of tact, the exquisite humour, the wit, heartiness,[1]" and so on. This seems to be at once about Dickens's writing but also about the author's personal powers and characteristics. Later, Lewes says (Collins p.67) that Dickens's descriptions of every-day life "are written with such unaffected ease that we feel convinced he has witnessed everything of the kind, and laughed at them," while the Morning Advertiser (25 October 1836) praises the "pénétration d'esprit" shown by Dickens as he finds comedy in ordinary people and events.[2]

The reality that informs the comedy impresses both of these critics, and they imagine the author translating his life-experience into art, perhaps heightening it by use of the comic, perhaps choosing comic details from life to describe. The Eclectic Review (April 1837, p.340) believes that Dickens has "seen a great deal of human life," has "viewed it with a very keen and observant eye," and has "deeply studied" peculiarities of manner and language. This is said about the first half of Pickwick Papers, and the assumption appears to be that if there are peculiar characters

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[1] This speaks also of Dickens's versatility. See above, p.20.

[2] See below, p. 202 for comments of a similar nature.

in the novel their presence may be explained by the existence somewhere of original people whom Dickens has studied. Such comments do not solely apply to the comic. The parochial funeral in Oliver Twist, for example, proves for the Dublin University Magazine (December 1838, p.703) that "our author's capacity for observation has not been exercised merely upon what is ludicrous in humanity." And some reviewers merely see reality in the early works. The Satirist (14 February 1836, p.51) simply claims that Boz is "a man of unquestionable talent and of great and correct observation," and the Spectator (20 February 1836, p.182) claims that the author is "evidently well-acquainted with the kind of life described" in his work.

Early in his career, little is known about him, and reviewers can only judge of his character and talents by what they see on the printed page. The danger that faces the comic writer, that he may be laughed at instead of laughed with, is occasionally apparent in the criticisms. The clearest example of this is in the reviews written by Judge Beverley Tucker in the American Southern Literary Messenger (May and September 1837). Poe, reviewing Sketches by Boz in an earlier issue (June 1836, p.457) admits to knowing nothing about the author and makes a literary judgment instead.[3] In Tucker's attacks, little more is known, and the comedy of the works reviewed is adversely criticised in terms of personal abuse. In the article on "Tulrumble and Oliver Twist" (May 1837, p.323) Tucker still does not know who "Boz" is, and, referring to his "antics," asks, "What right has he that we should suppose him anything better than the Jack-Pudding of a drunken-club?" The attack is directed against both Dickens and his followers, whom the reviewer advises his readers to shun (p.325) as "bad company and dull company." In the later review

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[3] See below, p.268.

(September 1837, p.525) he claims that his quarrel is not personally with Dickens but with the public who force him to write as he does; but the parallel he draws between the "kept author" and the prostitute who is the victim of her keepers, naturally makes the criticism personally directed. These articles in the Southern Literary Messenger are the first examples of extensive harsh attacks on Dickens which are at the same time personal as well as literary criticism.

Thomas Hood, in the Athenaeum (7 November 1840, Collins p.98), speaking of the pathos, says Dickens has "a well-toned head and heart working in harmony with each other," and he adds that "no writer's personal character seems more identified with his writings than that of Boz." Reviewers generally create an impression of him as a kindly, humane, genial person. As a satirist, for example, he shows, according to Lister, in the Edinburgh Review (October 1838, p.77), "good feeling" as well as "sound sense" in his ridicule which is "not misanthropic;" and Ford, in the Quarterly Review (June 1839, p.90) says almost the same thing about his wit, which is "sparkling and good natured - never savage, sarcastic, malevolent, nor misanthropic." The Monthly Review (January 1839, p.39) also praises Dickens as satirist, in its review of Oliver Twist. He is " a humane satirist" who is "free from all bitterness," and "never indulges in invective of any kind." The satire, according to Lewes in the National Magazine and Monthly Critic (December 1837, Collins p.67) gives the impression of "an individual under the lash laughing at it himself, and feeling its deep truth at the same time." All of these statements, of course, tell us something about the quality of the comedy, but they are couched in personal terms. The man who writes such things must, it is felt, possess the qualities his work reveals. Literature is expression of personality. The American "J.S.D.," in the Christian Examiner carries this personal regard for the author further than most reviewers. Humour,

he says (p.170), is the "natural posture" of Dickens's mind, and it is best found in "earnest and loving souls" like Dickens. The humorist is, we are told (pp.171-72), "in harmony with himself, of good sense, and loving everything genuine, like himself." He observes the "not genuine" in the world around him, and, "Too buoyant and full of health to be sickened by it," the humorist merely describes without judging it, and it becomes "irresistibly comic." The powers of humour and satire are described as personal qualities in this way, but Dickens is so accurate an observer of what is going on around him that his satire of society is no personal attack, but merely a true picture drawn by an impartial pen. The reviewer goes on (p.173) to paint a glowing picture of Dickens as a deeply religious and morally-exemplary person. With comments of a varying nature on the subject of the author's personal kindliness, what amounts almost to a myth about Dickens grows up, so that his later bitter satires appear to be either temporary aberrations of a genial spirit, or a more permanent decline from his youthful hilarity.

Even the absence of vulgarity in the comedy is described in personal terms by the Court Magazine (April 1837, Collins p.35), which says that the reader is allowed to enjoy the "broad drollery released from all its repulsive associations," because the subjects are "passed through the alembic of his mind and come, if we may say so, purified before the public." More frequent, however, is simple praise for the comedy of the novels, in which reviewers are clearly as enthusiastic about the author as they are about his work. According to Chambers's Edinburgh Journal (9 April 1836, p.83), Boz "has much comic power, and perceives traits which are not consciously noted by ordinary observers," and his "power of describing the singular and the ridiculous" is praised by Bell's Life in London (10 April 1836). Similar praise to this is offered by the Morning Post (11 May 1836, p.5), and the Edinburgh Review

(October 1838, p.76) speaks of Boz's keen sense of the ridiculous, among other attributes. His "keen apprehension for the ludicrous" and his quick perception of it are praised respectively by The Sun (4 July 1839) and the Examiner (28 February 1836, p.132), while the County Herald (16 April 1836) simply praises Boz's "wit and eccentricities." Almost always, they are "Boz's" qualities, not those of the works.

Some reviewers wonder whether Dickens is not capable of better, however. The Athenaeum (20 February 1836, p.145) doubts whether the subjects of Sketches by Boz are "always worthy of the artistic skill and power of the writer," a comment which is not explained further but may mean that the reviewer feels that Boz has it in him to be more than a comic writer of the type he appears to be. The Examiner (28 February 1836, p.132) is, at this stage, sure that the fault of this first work is its "caricature of Cockneyism" which is said to be "unworthy of the author."[4] The Monthly Review (March 1836, p.351) generally feels that Dickens has not "come up to what might be expected from his head and his pen." The succeeding novels must, however, have satisfied reviewers on this score, because the comment is rarely heard again in the early reviews.

When low spots are detected in Dickens's work, these are explained, too, in personal terms. The News and Sunday Herald (10 April 1836, p.118) finds in "The Tuggses at Ramsgate" some "common-place incidents and far-fetched humour" which contrasts with the "fresh pungency" of his earlier efforts. Boz, the reviewer feels, makes too-frequent demands on his imagination and would do well to study "the fable of the goose that laid the golden eggs." The same thing is noted by J. Cooke, in Actors by Daylight (9 February 1839, p.117). Dickens, he says, takes too-liberal

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4 Brice, loc.cit., suggests this may have been written by Albany Fonblanque, not Forster.

draughts of his imagination too often and occasionally appears to suffer from exhaustion. During this, his most prolific period, he is thus counselled against writing too fast, while others - e.g. the Spectator (31 March 1838 p.304) - tell him to make hay while the sun shines.

When Dickens appears to offend against the critical canon of truth, his failing is sometimes seen in personal terms. Reviewers often consider the possible effects of any errors he makes, as I showed in the last chapter, but they also claim that he is ignorant of the real facts or has not the mental ability to argue clearly. Although this critical trend is mixed up with the concerns for truth and effect, it is important here because of the personal failings and the ignorance that are said to characterise the author. Fraser's Magazine (April 1840[5]) claims that he knows no more about the law than Tony Weller does, and in the Quarterly Review (October 1837, p.509), Abraham Hayward suggests that Dickens's ignorance limits him in his descriptions of lawyers in Pickwick Papers, and he feels that the country scenes fail for a similar reason: Boz seems, he says (p.507), "to possess about the same amount of general knowledge" about game-keepers as "Winkle and Tupman display during the shooting excursion." The reader is able to distinguish, according to the reviewer, between scenes which have been observed by the author, those which he has imitated from other authors and those which he has merely imagined. Thus it is doubted whether Dickens was ever at one of Mrs. Leo Hunter's déjeuners, but "we feel quite sure that he was acquainted with Mr. Bob Sawyer, and accompanied Mr. Pickwick to the supper party given by that young man to his associates." This may be taken as evidence of the author's power of creating a vital illusion, but reviewers clearly seem to think that the author must have experienced a scene to be able to

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[5] Extract in Kitton, Dickensiana, pp.90-91.

describe it so clearly. Ford, in the Quarterly Review (June 1839, p.91), judges Dickens's rural scenes by the same standard. His descriptions of rural felicity and scenery are "over-laboured and out of nature" because "he clearly knows much less" of such scenes than he knows of London. The lack of knowledge on the part of the author, and his knowledge through experience are to become common explanations for his failures and successes in later periods. One idea that is later frequently pressed against Dickens appears already. Ford (p.91) says that Dickens's genteel characters are failures, and he feels that they are "the misconceptions of our author's uninitiated imagination, mystified by the inanities of the kid-glove Novelists." He is never vulgar, however, when dealing with vulgar characters. It becomes a critical cliché amongst those who wish to decry Dickens that he cannot paint a gentleman, and it is often said to be caused by his own ignorance of the higher classes. He knows much more about lower class people because, it is said, he has mixed with them more.

The London University Magazine (I, 1842, p.378), coming at the end of the early period, may be seen partially to sum up a number of the ideas of early reviewers. One of its stated aims in its review of Oliver Twist is "to reflect on the man, as well as the author, as seen in his works," and since Dickens's novels are regarded (p.379) as "revelations of mind," there is a lot of emphasis on his mental and moral capacities. The satire betrays his good nature, and his powers of observation and his sense of humour are apparent throughout (p.385). Satire, the reviewer says (p.392), is not his "native vein," although his "generosity of character," his "contempt for selfishness" and his "hatred to oppression" sometimes call it forth. In this, the reviewer is not quite at one with most of his contemporaries. The strong, harsh kind of satire which he appears to have in mind rarely appears in the early works, and Dickens's

early satires are often close in tone to humour: genial, kindly, tolerant, laughing. But in a way, satire is enveloped in humour, and it is not surprising that the reviewer should feel that Dickens is not a satirist. Oliver Twist, he claims (p.383), is like all of Dickens's works, "the genuine and heartfelt production of a pure and truthful mind, endowed with the most acute powers of perception, and gifted with a lively imagination under the constant control of pure sentiment." This says nothing specifically about the comedy, but it shows the context in which the comic is to be seen, and since humour is felt often to be an emotional comic mode - close to pathos and encouraging love and sympathy - it is not surprising, in view of this kind of character-reading, that he should be seen mostly as a humorist.

In general in this early period, reviewers find in the novels an attractive personality and commendable personal powers. Although perhaps inclined to err because of over work or at times, ignorance, the new author is widely accepted for his personal qualities as well as for the truthfulness and effectiveness of his works. One main point in his favour is that, as the London University Magazine says (p.393), he is a young man, and it is hoped his faults will be amended as he grows older and learns more about his art and the world. But on the positive side, the early works are felt to be the effusive bubblings-over of an energetic and exuberant nature, with admirable sympathies and social conscience as well.

The Middle Years : 1843 -1852

Dickens had made himself a reputation as an observer of men and places, a man of kindly temperament and great comic perception. Those who are disappointed with his American Notes because it contains no discussion of the country's political and social arrangements, seem to expect that his versatility - already amply proven in his early novels - should

be unlimited. If this is so, they quickly discover his limitations, but it seems that their expectations of a different kind of book are a pose which allows them to object to Dickens's politics and to cut the highly successful young author down to size. They end up saying that he is a mere comic writer skilled in describing lower class English life, but out of his depth when any powers of intellect are required. He is ignorant of important facets of American life, and his having visited the country has made neither him nor his readers any the wiser. The failures - as well as, in favourable reviews, the successes - of American Notes are often attributed to personal causes. C.C. Felton, in the North American Review (January 1843, Collins p.134), sums up many objections to, and projected personal causes of the work when he says that some people expected of Dickens "long disquisitions upon what are called American Institutions, - philosophical tirades upon the working of the republican machine of government, - or the future prospects of the world as affected by what we style the great experiment of self-government." Such persons, he says, "expected what they had no right to look for from the author of Pickwick." Without intending to decry Dickens, Felton says that because of his "habits of thought and intellectual peculiarities," Dickens could not have written the kind of book that others expected, and he finds merit in his "striking expressions, brilliant descriptions, witty turns, and humorous sallies."

That is, Felton treats it as literature rather than expects it to satisfy preconceptions of what a book about America should be. British reviewers - in Blackwood's Magazine (December 1842), Fraser's Magazine (November 1842), the Quarterly Review (March 1843) and the Edinburgh Review (January 1843) - state their disappointment that it is not what they expected, but add that since Dickens is only a comic writer it is not surprising that he could not write a better book, and the lack of intellect

that they attribute to him remains a personally-directed gibe for the rest of his career. He is, as James Spedding says, in the Edinburgh Review (January 1843, p.499), a comic writer not only "by profession" but also "by humour" and this is often seen as a mental or emotional characteristic which delimits his powers. Adverse British criticisms go nowhere near as far in personal abuse as does the New York Herald[6] which says Dickens's mind is "most coarse, vulgar, impudent and superficial" and that he is the "most flimsy, the most childish - the most trashy - the most contemptible" of all the travellers who had gone to America. But in the reaction to this work, there appears - widespread for the first time - the kind of personal criticism that dogs Dickens's reputation throughout the period under survey. And it is advanced both by a favourable and by hostile critics.

That Dickens had been to America and had written a controversial book on his travels is a distraction to some reviewers of Martin Chuzzlewit. A reviewer in the Westminster Review (December 1843, p.459) suspects what has been shown[7] to be true, when he says, "We wonder it did not occur to Mr. Dickens that this satire might tell against himself. Was he only a Martin Chuzzlewit to the people of America when they crowded to do him homage?" Dickens's motive is analysed, and the kind of critical approach that assumes that fiction has its roots in the writer's experience gains even more prestige than it usually has, because of the circumstances of the case: Dickens had been to America and had shown interest in describing his travels. It is not surprising that the fiction is treated partly as an extension of American Notes. In this vein, Cleghorn in the North British Review (May 1845, p.74), says that the American scenes in the

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6 Quoted, E.F. Payne, "Dickens's First Look at America," Dickensian (Winter 1942, p.13). No date is given.

7 By Harry Stone, "Dickens' Use of his American Experiences in Martin Chuzzlewit." PMLA (June 1957, pp.468-78).

novel are "a book of travels dramatized, and not in the best or most candid spirit," but his view is also literary, and he objects because he feels that the inclusion of the American episodes mars the unity of the novel.

In general, however, criticism directed at Dickens the traveller is less frequent in the reaction to Martin Chuzzlewit than it had been in the reviews of American Notes partly because there are more typical elements of the Dickens novel in it that need to be discussed and partly because so much had already been said on the American question. But the reaction to Dickens's attempted descriptions of America shows that when critics do not agree with him or feel he has failed in some way, criticism with a personal bias appears. Cleghorn agrees, substantially, with Dickens's opinion of America and says little that is directed at Dickens himself, but earlier (p.69), he objects to the satire of parochial authorities in Oliver Twist as an instance of " narrowminded antipathy" on Dickens's part. That Dickens is biased or somehow unqualified to speak becomes a favourite adverse criticism of his later satires, but its beginnings may be seen in this period. The most common cause of his failure is ignorance, according to a number of critics. Not only did he know little about America, he even knows little about certain aspects of England, especially the higher reaches of its society. Sharpe's London Magazine (May 1848, p.202) in fact hopes that it is ignorance that causes him to be unfair to the aristocracy, because the alternative explanation for his conduct is that he has a deliberate bias against it, and the reviewer does not like to think that so popular an author should be guilty of such an offence. According to W.E. Aytoun, in Blackwood's Magazine (November 1846, Collins pp.208-9), however, Dickens is one of a group of writers who describe the aristocracy but who "know nothing whatever of the society which they affect to describe" and which "in truth they grossly libel." The cause of the "libel" is, Aytoun claims, mere social

inferiority and petty jealousy.

Shades of the reaction to American Notes reappear in the reaction to Pictures from Italy. Dickens takes care to say in his first chapter that he does not aim to discuss Italian history, government,arts and religion, but rather, fancifully to describe the places he had visited, for the entertainment and stimulation of his readers. His "portrait" of the reader suggests that he is writing the work not for the benefit of those who had objected so strongly to American Notes, and that he is anxious to avoid the kind of reaction his earlier work had stirred up. Nevertheless, the Economist (10 October 1846, Collins p.214) says that he had made an error in writing a book about "a land which he does not understand" because of his ignorance of its literature and arts, and the reviewer says that Dickens possesses "genius and observation" but only for writing about his own country. The work is poorly received also by The Times (1 June 1846, p.7) which says that "travels and grave essays on men and manners are not his vocation." Though few readers could be so unreasonable as to expect from Dickens the kind of knowledge about Italy that "comes with early training and classic study," he has not, the reviewer says, given in place of such specialised knowledge the quality for which he is famous, his "Pickwickian zest." The work, therefore, satisfies neither the interests of the educated nor the expectations of those who like Dickens as a source of amusement. Such a reaction may be expected to a book on such a subject, but Aytoun, in Blackwood's Magazine (November 1846, Collins p.208), referring primarily to Dickens, complains that authors nowadays do not study their art before they write. They reject models and write swiftly and flimsily - "not without sparkles of genuine humour," but relying more on talent and native ability than on more solid acquirements. Dickens does not take care to inform himself by study before he writes on a specialised subject such as Italy or America, some critics say, but Aytoun feels that he should study his craft well

before writing at all. The kind of criticism that sees Dickens as an uncultured genius whose faults are due to his lack of education, becomes more widespread in later periods. Not only does he lack prior requirements, but for some critics he seems to be unable to improve himself. The Family Journal (5 December 1846, p.16), for example, finds no improvement, in Dombey and Son, and suspects that Dickens is "a man who writes more than he reads."

A man's writings are the product of his mind, and if Dickens does not seem to possess the intellectual powers expected of him in some quarters, there is nevertheless an interest in the faculties of mind he does have. One who finds acceptable mental powers in Dickens is R.H. Horne (1844), who had personal acquaintance with Dickens, and had therefore a basis of knowledge for the personal criticism he offers. Humour, he says (pp.8,40) is a predominant, if not the highest, mental characteristic of the author, and, having praised many of Dickens's characters - a large number of those mentioned being comic - Horne claims, (p.28), that the materials Dickens uses in his novels "are evidently the product of a frequent way-faring in dark places . . . undertaken by a most observing eye, and a mind exactly suited to the qualities of its external sight." If ever the author's life were said to be in his books, Horne says, it may be said of Dickens, because his books contain things he has seen and they express "the principal faculties of his mind and heart wrought up to their capacious development." His creative process is described (p.57) as being "instinctive." Dickens, according to Horne, does not tax his brain but "transcribes what he finds writing itself there." His creation is both swift and effortless, and it is said (p.63) that his works are "the spontaneous offspring of a mind that has started upon a well-understood course, and a nervous system that lives in the characters and scenes of imaginative creation." All this reinforces the well-spread ideas that

Dickens writes in his novels what he observes in real life, and answers the charge of lack of culture by saying that his works are written with ease and with great personal involvement. In private, Horne adds (p.75), Dickens is "very much what might be expected from his works," a fact which Horne finds to be "by no means an invariable coincidence." Dickens's conversation is "genial" and he "never talks for effect, but for the truth or for the fun of the thing." He tells a story admirably, "generally with humorous exaggerations."

As Horne was acquainted with Dickens, perhaps his first-hand knowledge of the author should not be doubted, but his description of Dickens seems to be curiously too much like the literary personality, and Horne may well wish here to reinforce the impression that he knows Dickens has worked to create, and that he feels is a desirable example for his readers to have placed before them. Forster, too, knew Dickens, and his aim may have been the same as Horne's, to encourage readers to believe that Dickens the man is the same as the personal impression given by his works.[8] Yet, in his review of Dombey and Son in the Examiner (28 October 1848, Collins p.232), he says "We doubt if any writer that ever lived has inspired such strong feelings of personal attachment in his impersonal character or as an author." Perhaps this means that Forster wishes to show that too easy an assumption of personal details from the author's fiction may be an error, but if this is so, he only hints at the possibility, because he discusses the point no further. The "strong feelings of personal attachment" Dickens creates are, of course, a laudatory achievement. Novelists are praised if they encourage the "right emotions and attitudes in readers by setting a public example, and had Forster felt that Dickens was not what he appears to be in his works, he might not have said so, even if he had not been the author's friend.

The most valuable critical emphasis exemplified by Forster and by

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[8] He does this also in his biography, see below, p.240.

others is that Dickens's fiction is imaginative. To a certain extent Dickens is "type-cast" as a sympathetic, good-natured, humorous, but not particularly intellectual person, and this impression remains in some quarters for the rest of the period under survey. But it is recognised that in a way he is clever, that his comedy evidences a peculiar kind of power, and that above all, he is an imaginative writer. The attribution to him of such qualities is partly bound up with the question of the truthfulness of his work, discussed in Chapter One above.[9] There, I showed that Forster, in his reviews of Martin Chuzzlewit and Dombey and Son, in the Examiner (26 October 1844 and 28 October 1848) finds qualities which "satisfy imagination and reflection." This suggests that Dickens has both qualities himself, and Whipple, in the North American Review (October 1849) praises his "piercing insight" into human character. Phillips, in The Times (11 June 1851) says that the Peggottys in David Copperfield evidence at once Dickens's "knowledge and imagination," and Horne (1844) pays tribute to his knowledge of life as well as his creative powers. Dickens is not merely a describer of life, but he is not merely a creator of the impossible or the unknown. He may not be a great intellectual, but he has the mind of an artist. He may be highly sympathetic, loving, good natured and genial, but he is also more than a soft-hearted describer of Little Nells and Paul Dombeys.

Over-use of imagination may be said, however, to be a fault on a par with failure to describe nature, and it is to become a strong adverse criticism later that Dickens's imagination lacks control and moderation. Any evidence of shapelessness or exaggeration is likely to be explained by one of a variety of arguments positing the cause in Dickens's mind or natural faculties. In this period, only the beginnings of later

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[9] See pp. 63ff. in particular.

hostility may be seen, but in some cases the personal bias is unmistakable. The Court Journal (21 December 1850, p.809) protests against the unreality of the characters[10] and claims that the reason his grasp of the real is so tenuous is that his mind is highly poetic and imaginative. More aggressively, the Guardian (9 May 1849, p.304) says that Major Bagstock is the kind of character, becoming increasingly common in Dickens's works, who exists nowhere "save in the crazed imagination of Mr. Dickens." Because a fault is found, the reviewer examines Dickens's motive, but claims that he does not believe Dickens "means anything by what he pretends to tell" through his disjointed plots and impossible characters,[11] and charges him with "bookmaking." Rather more kindly, Samuel Phillips, in The Times (11 June 1851, p.8), protesting against the exaggeration of more elevated characters in David Copperfield, says that either people in the "best society" have not their little tricks of the body or Dickens has "an unnatural faculty of detecting them." Probably Phillips believes the first possibility, but he suggests that perhaps there is a personal cause for the literary "fault." If Dickens is felt to have erred, he may be said not to respect the rules of artistic composition, but he may be said to be personally incapable of adhering to them. His mind may be so structured that orderliness and accuracy of description are beyond it. This kind of criticism, of course, contrasts with earlier admiration for his powers of accurate observation. Indeed, at one stage, around the time of American Notes, apparently, Dickens was said to have gone mad. This was, no doubt, an idle mischievous rumour, but the tendency is certainly there in the criticisms to explain artistic "disorders" by

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[10] See above, p.70.

[11] See above, p.73.

corresponding mental ones. Horne (1844, p.48-49)makes mention of the "absurd report, extensively circulated, some year or two ago,[12]" and stresses, in opposition, "the true characteristics of Mr. Dickens' mind," which, he says, "are "objective, and always have a practical tendency." Dickens concentrates his attention on "the actual and concrete," and "the ideal and the elementary are not his region." Horne believes that Dickens is creative, but he neverthless stresses the practical and realistic nature of Dickens's mind.

His failures could,of course, be said to be caused by tiredness. The idea of some earlier reviewers, that Dickens writes too fast is suggested by Cleghorn, in the North British Review (May 1845, p.80) as the reason for the "most careless and even slovenly manner" in which parts of Martin Chuzzelwit are composed. He says that Dickens sometimes affects great exuberance and vivacity in order to hide "an occasional flagging" attributable both to the speed at which he writes and to carelessness caused by easy success. It seems, Cleghorn says, that Dickens's "natural buoyancy and fun" cannot "keep pace with the frequently recurring demands on his pen." But the most looked-for personal characteristics and intentions at this stage in Dickens's career are emotional and moral ones. The trait most given to the humorist is "geniality" which is praised in Dickens by the Athenaeum (20 July 1844, p.666), and the English Review (December 1848, p.268) widens this to "genial sympathy with his fellow-men." The latter reviewer shows in its simplest form the theory that fiction is an expression of the author's personality, when he says that Dickens feels sympathy especially with children and childlike characters. This means for him that Dickens has a "pure and lovely childlike spirit," and he says

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12 I have not traced its source, but it is attested to also by Sala, in the Belgravia magazine (February 1868, Collins p.488), who says the rumour appeared in 1842, after the appearance of The Old Curiosity Shop.

"This he must possess who could write thus, despite his keen sagacity, sound sense, and knowledge of the world." The reviewer creates Dickens in the image of favourite characters.

A more sophisticated view than this of Dickens's creative method and personal involvement is held by Whipple, in the North American Review (October 1849, Collins pp.238-40). Whipple stresses three things. Dickens "has an open sense for all the liberal influences of his time;" and the "humanity, the wide-ranging and healthy sympathies, and, especially, the recognition of the virtues which obtain among the poor and humble" which are characteristic of his works, are characteristic also of the age. Dickens is a man of his time. This means, in the second place, that Whipple emphasises his emotional characteristics. He surveys human nature "from the position of charity and love," and he has "a sort of laughing toleration" for "foibles of character." These two things are in fact part of a larger idea, that Dickens is part of his social milieu and writes in accordance with its powerful influences. The third thing that Whipple discusses is Dickens's creation of character. In this, he says, Dickens is "troubled with no uneasy sense of himself." In creating Sam Weller or Mrs. Nickleby, he "forgets Charles Dickens" and enters into the characters. His mind, as Whipple puts it, "genially assimilates other minds," because "his perceptions are not bounded by his personality, but continually apprehend and interpret new forms of individual being." His "fellow-feeling with his race is his genius." Thus, Dickens is a man of his time with characteristics dictated by it, but he has his own particular genius which is for the creation and understanding of comic characters who are both true to nature and true to Dickens. That is, they are recognisably the products of art as well as, in some degree, copies of nature. Yet Whipple says later that, in creation of character, Dickens seems to be taken by surprise as his "glad and genial fancies

throng into his brain." He seems to "laugh and exult with the beings he has called into existence in the spirit of a man observing not creating." Whipple's ideas are couched in unmistakably personal terms, but he allows some freedom to create to the artist, instead of merely assuming that fiction is an expression of the author's own emotional qualities. Yet, he does not stray too far from the general impression of Dickens that prevails in criticism at this time, and he is but one step from the theory of personal expression when he talks of the spirit of the age, although he almost, but not quite, takes the next step, to the positing of a literary convention. He notes that the same sympathy with the poor and other qualities that are evident in Dickens's works may be seen in a wide range of literary works, "from the sermons of Dr. Channing to the feuilletons of Eugene Sue," but argues that they too, are expressing widespread feelings in society.

Other reviewers' comments on the personal nature of the author are much simpler than Whipple's. William Howitt, in the People's Journal (3 June 1846, Collins p.205) praises his "fine human constitution." Dickens laughs at anything ludicrous, but there is no malice in his laugh. It is, Howitt says, "the merriment of a genuine heart which, while it laughs , loves and does justice," and the reader feels "unconscious admiration" for the "sound, healthy, moral constitution of the writer." Dickens has, because of his "fine human constitution," a great influence for good. His aim to do good is noted by the Monthly Review (September 1844,. p.143) which praises his benevolence and good intention, and by Masson, in the North British Review (May 1851, Collins p.253), who says that his reforming zeal is dictated by a "warm and generous heart." In such comments may be seen the kind of personal assessment that Dickens had to live up to; and not merely as a humorist is he painted as a kindly, loving creature, but also as a satirist, in this period, he is said to

show the same qualities, and not contempt for mankind, as Thackeray is sometimes said to do. As the Monitor (1 February 1851, p.29) puts it, there is "such a love of the good and the amiable" in all of Dickens's writings, and "such an evident pleasure in dwelling on the pure and innocent," that "no worthy reader can help kindling towards him." Again, this is directed at readers, in whom it is necessary to encourage such moral attributes, but, whether it is true about Dickens or not, what almost amounts to a myth grows up around him, and strengthens the impression of him as a genial humorist with high emotional involvement with his own creations and with his public. It is not surprising that the harsher comedy of some parts of the later novels upsets some reviewers, nor is it unexpected that so strong a myth should survive through the rest of his career and beyond, no matter what he does or some of his later reviewers say to disprove it. The "real" Dickens is felt to be in these early works.

At the end of the middle period, Dickens creates personal contact between himself and his readers through the partly autobiographical David Copperfield. Fraser's Magazine (December 1850, Collins p.246) and The Times (11 June 1851, p.8) guess at the possibility of autobiography, but criticism with a personal bias does not increase because it seems the reviewers treat the idea, at this stage, as being fanciful. The greatest emphasis on personality comes from two sources : Dickens's friends - Forster and Horne, in this period, are examples; and his enemies - such as the critic in the Guardian quoted above, who prefers Thackeray's greater truth and realism. Partisanship of Dickens and Thackeray expresses an already-developing decline of enthusiasm for Dickens's exaggeration and his encouragement of emotional response. David Masson, in the North British Review (May 1851, Collins p.251) sensibly avoids partisanship, but nonetheless reinforces the sterotyped ideas

held by critics with regard to the two authors. He says that he wishes to view their intellects "as far as possible without reference to their special function as artistic writers," and finds that Dickens's mind is "of looser, richer, and freer texture" than that of his rival. And although Masson does not find (Collins p.252) in him the intellectual strength of Thackeray, he does allow him "remarkable" power of intellect, without which power no one would be able to rise to "his degree of excellence" in any department of literature. Still, Dickens is more likely to be emotionally persuasive than Thackeray, who possesses and practices " a cool, masculine, and decisive judgement." Dickens's greater emotionalism is evident in his social criticism, Masson says (Collins p.253), and he guesses that Dickens's tendency to pronounce on social matters may be due to "a native combativeness conjoined with great benevolence of disposition." All of the time, in his "reading" of Dickens's character, Masson is cautious, and he is fair to Dickens despite his dislike for some aspects of his work, such as his inclusion of social criticism in it. Masson, in fact, reconciles two tendencies in criticism which are illustrated by the partisanship of critics for Dickens or Thackeray. Some praise the appeals to the heart which are said to characterise Dickens, but others prefer Thackeray's presumed intellectual appeal. Masson generally agrees with this schematisation, but points out that both men share both characteristics, and he further manages to find merit in the work of each. Preference for "intellectual" appeal is one reason for the attacks on Dickens later in his career, but the desire to attack Dickens - because of his political and social views, often - may also be what leads, in some cases, to emphasis on the intellect. Dickens, that is, acts as a catalyst on the developing desire for intellectually-satisfying fiction.

Despite the fact that "humour" is used as a general term, the personal qualities of Dickens as a humorist are becoming evident - his genial

sympathy for his fellowmen is probably the most comprehensive phrase used to describe it. Those who speak of his humour look for moral and emotional attributes, and there is an increasing tendency to deny him any great intellect. The adverse reaction to the later satires is based partly on the idea that Dickens has little intellectual prowess, and this, it may be seen, extends as far back as the appearance of American Notes. But as Masson's criticism shows, there is allowed to Dickens a certain degree of a peculiar mental faculty as well. His defenders begin to pay tribute to the imaginative qualities of his work, and although his imagination is not highly regarded by all, there is a developing interest in it, and its quality is a matter for debate in later periods.

The Later Novels : 1853 - 1870

Following on from what he says in the North British Review, Masson, in British Novelists and their Styles (1859, p.240),refers the "difference of style" between Thackeray and Dickens to "its origin in difference of intellectual constitution." He does not argue with the opinion of "critics [who] are accustomed to say that Thackeray's is the mind of closer and harder, and Dickens's the mind of looser and richer texture." Dickens, he says later (p.244), is "more genial, kindly, cheerful and sentimental" than Thackeray, and expresses a "philosophy of kindliness, of a genial interest in all things great and small, of a light English joyousness, and a universal sunny benevolence." Masson refuses to join either faction which sees Dickens as a sickly sentimentalist or Thackeray as a cynical misanthrope. His sensible criticism takes no sides in the debate between the adherents of the two authors, and he is able to appreciate the excellence of each novelist. He is aware of, and accepts, the tendency to find the cause of literary style, expression and "philosophy"

in an author's mind, and in his understanding of both writers, he gives a lead to other critics which many of them find difficult to follow.

Dickens is disliked partly because he attacks the interests of critics who are sympathetic to existing institutions and to the upper classes, and partly because his emotional emphasis and his artistic methods are questioned even more strongly by those of Realist persuasion. Dickens may have suffered from a decline of interest in pathos and an increasing preference for intellectual wit over emotional humour,[13] but the attacks on him may also have caused these developments. A strong influence on hostile critics appears to have been Henri Taine's article in the Revue des Deux Mondes (1 February 1856[14]). A number of subsequent British critics seem to borrow some of Taine's ideas which they re-model to suit British conditions and their own reasons for attacking Dickens. Taine finds (p.346[14]) that Dickens's imagination is irregular and perfectly suited, therefore, to the description of deranged reason in characters like Augustus Moddle and Mr. Dick, the one a "gloomy maniac" and the other "half an idiot, half a monomaniac." It seems that Taine believes Dickens expresses something of his own nature in such characters, because he says (p.344) that his imagination is "like that of monomaniacs." It is, he says (p.346), "irregular, excessive, capable of fixed ideas," and Dickens's "extravagant comicality springs from excess of imagination" but, Taine adds (p.352), Dickens usually remains grave while drawing his caricatures. In this, he is a typical Englishman, lacking in happiness and brightness of mind, but rather intense and tenacious instead (p.353). His characteristics suit and are encouraged

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[13] For these developments, see Phillip Collins, "Dombey and Son, Then and Now." Dickensian 1967 pp82-94 and R.B. Martin, op.cit.

[14] repr. History of English Literature, trans. H. Van Laun. (2nd edn. vol. 2 Edinburgh 1872). All page references are to this source.

by the English public which, Taine claims (p.354), represses gaiety in favour of morality and the encouragement of love and kindness. Though Taine is rather unfair in saying this, he might with justice have said it about many reviewers in their reaction to Dickens's comedy, but Dickens's comedy itself, and the popular enthusiasm for it, both contradict Taine.

British reviewers who seem to take up Taine's ideas make more of Dickens's personal failings than of the social influence that Taine says works on Dickens, partly because most do not wish to offend a public that is theirs as well as Dickens's, and partly because they are attempting to persuade the public of his mediocrity, sometimes in retaliation against his social criticisms. Attacks on the national character might have been unpopular, but those critics who deplore public enthusiasm for melodrama and pathos, by diverting the force of their objections to Dickens - among other novelists - indirectly attack the taste that encourages him. The whole area of hostile criticism is a mixture of varied motives about which it is almostimpossible to generalise, but personal attacks on Dickens for his intellectual limitations are very common. Many reviewers make it their aim, as Justin McCarthy puts it, in the Westminster Review (October 1864, p.415), to study "some of the leading qualities of his mind and style, so far as these qualities find their expression" in his works. And like McCarthy (p.427), many of them are dissatisfied, and find "a want of analytical power" in the author. As a rationalist journal, the Westminster Review has a special cause for such criticism, but it is widespread in the intellectually more demanding journals. What is a tendency to find certain qualities of the author's mind in his style becomes, at times, almost a vindictive reduction of his mental capacity to the power of producing only what are considered the weakest elements in his books.

An influential criticism of this kind is that of Walter Bagehot, who

discusses Dickens's intellectual make-up in his article in the National Review (October 1858). He says (p.189[15]) that Dickens's genius is "irregular and unsymmetrical," and he concludes (p.220) that the two elements conspicuously lacking in him are the "masculine faculties" of "the reasoning understanding and firm, far-seeing sagacity." At the same time, he is "too much inclined by natural disposition" to the - presumably feminine[16] - characteristics of "lachrymose eloquence and exaggerated caricature." Dickens lacks education, but if he had had a regular education, Bagehot says (p.217), his genius would not have been radically altered and at best might have only been thwarted. His genius is further characterised by his "power of observation in detail" (p.194) and by his "vivification of character,or rather of characteristics" (p.197). Dickens has acute powers of observation, but he only notices externals, and his humour, Bagehot claims (p.202) is particularly dependent not on the reality of his characters but on the power Dickens has of vivifying particular traits. Bagehot does not use Taine's terminology, but his emphasis on this unsymmetrical "bizzarerie" of Dickens's genius (p.194) is similar to the French critic's idea of a kind of diseased imagination. Dickens's powers naturally lead, Bagehot feels, to the exaggerated caricature which is his fault, and his lack of a "reasoning understanding" prevents him from being an effective satirist. He is adept at creating comic characters, situations and details, but he cannot describe "essential human nature" and he is therefore not a high class nor even a serious artist.

Fitzjames Stephen is much less restrained in his personal criticism than Bagehot. At the end of a review of the Works, in the Saturday Review

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[15] Page references to reprint, loc.cit.

[16] cf. Masson, North British Review (May 1851, Collins p.251) and Stott, Contemporary Review below, p.229.

(8 May 1858, reprint[17] p.170), he says that there is " a sex in minds as well as bodies," and Dickens's "literary progeny seem to us to be for the most part of the feminine gender, and to betray it by most unceasing flirtations, and by a very tiresome irritability of nerve." Dickens is not merely a comic writer, because he has, from the first, been "led by nature as much as by art to mix up a very strong dose of sentiment with his caricature," Stephen claims (p.165). This was called for by his public, and Dickens was just the kind of man to answer the call. Often, in his reviews of individual works, Stephen sees Dickens as little more than a comic and pathetic writer who attempts social satire for which he is unfitted intellectually and temperamentally. As he says in the Saturday Review (4 July 1857, p.15), Dickens has either been "spoiled by success" or has "mistaken his powers." He is a "great master of humour - not of wit, for of this faculty he is quite innocent - but he thinks that his vocation is that of the social reformer, perhaps of the prophet." He is successful with Sam Weller, Dick Swiveller and Mrs. Gamp, but when he tries to sit in judgement upon the whole legal system of Britain and to denounce public men as "downright shams and selfish hypocrites," Stephen says, "we are forced to inquire whether this is not one sham among the universal crowd of shams - whether the preacher is not as his flock?" He is further reduced, a week later (11 July 1857, p.35), to "the most distinguished buffoon of society" who, after some successes as a youth in drawing attention to obvious abuses, now sees fit to set himself up as the regenerator of society. Because he can make men laugh and make silly women cry, Stephen protests, Dickens seems to think that he is qualified to be a social critic. Stephen and Bagehot are two of the leaders of a group of critics who insist that Dickens is suited by nature only to be a humorist

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[17] Albert Mordell, Notorious Literary Attacks (New York, 1926, repr. 1969, pp.162-170). Subsequent references are to this source.

or pathetic writer. He is fit to amuse the populace, but his abilities as a moralist or promoter of social reform are ridiculed.

Because humour is seen to be close to pathos or to be at least a more emotional, less rational comic mode than, for example, wit, Dickens's emotional powers are stressed by some reviewers. The American Knickerbocker magazine (August 1857, p.188) feels that both his humour and his pathos spring from "the fundamental structure" of his mind, and less enthusiastically, Edith Simcox ("H. Lawrenny"), reviewing Edwin Drood in the Academy (22 October 1870, Collins p.547), says that Dickens's tendency to imagine " a millenium of illogical good-will" is principally the result of his "natural humour." For some, the non-intellectual appeal of the humorist remains attractive, while there are a large number who seek greater intellectual control of materials. Alfred Austin, in his obituary in the Temple Bar Magazine (July 1870, p.559) claims that Dickens, with his robust "animal spirits," is most suited by nature to be a humorist rather than a wit, and he strongly defends the "animal spirits" and "vigorous veins" of the healthy humorist against the "dyspeptic" wit. But whereas Austin, concentrating on bodily health, admires humour, James Stothert, writing in the Rambler (January 1854, Collins p.295), finds an intellectual poverty in the absence of wit. He says,

> Of wit Dickens has none. The intellectual portion of his nature is not sufficiently refined, keen, or polished to appreciate the delicate subtleties of thought and language which are included in that singular and charming thing, a witty idea or expression. He rarely writes a sentence in his own proper character that imprints itself on the memory, or is worth treasuring in the storehouse of the brain. He is not a man of thought.

But it all depends on what the reviewer values, because the Eclectic Review (November 1865, p.475), while agreeing in a way with the Rambler, differs in its conclusion. Dickens has, the reviewer says, "very little of that

which, in the general use of language, is called wit; he does not seek to make his sentences bite," and for this reason he seems to some people to be "wanting in the proper proportion of mental strength." But the power of wit is likened by the reviewer to the spring of the tiger, and if Dickens does not have this, he has in its place the equally worthy strength of the elephant; and the reviewer adds that there is not always strength in agility. Dickens, that is, may not have vivacity of mind - according to the reviewer - but he has a solidity and dependability which are as admirable. The charge that Dickens has no wit is made so strongly and so unfairly that this critic, at least, is prompted to reply on his behalf; but few critics are willing to claim that he is witty, and the most persuasive attempt is made as late as 1903, by Alice Meynell in the Atlantic Monthly.[18]

There are more important issues at hand, in the 1850s and 1860s, however. Dickens is felt, by the Eclectic Review quoted above, to be dependable in some of his moral teaching, but for Fitzjames Stephen, his tendency to mislead the public is little short of immoral. In the Edinburgh Review (July 1857, p.128), at the beginning of an extensive protest against the misuse of facts by popular novelists, Stephen examines the "qualifications" Dickens possesses as a critic of the "various departments of social life." Bulwer Lytton evidences much classical and historical reading, Thackeray describes what he obviously knows, and Scott was an antiquarian, but Dickens seems not to have such "solid acquirements." He knows about as much about the law as an "attorney's clerk," and he offers simple statements on questions upon which most statesmen, lawyers and philosophers would shrink from giving an unqualified opinion. Dickens, for Stephen, is characterised both by his ignorance and

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[18] January 1903, p.54

by his temerity. Because of his ignorance especially, he is seen by other reviewers to be no satirist. Bentley's Monthly Review (October 1853, p.227) feels that in Bleak House Dickens attacks problems which he does not understand, and that he should leave such matters to "wiser and more experienced heads than his," and in the same novel, the creation of Mr. Chadband offends the Eclectic Review (December 1853, p.677), which feels that he is ignorant of the ministers of Bethel. Despite this, the British Quarterly Review (vol.35, 1862, pp.158-59) finds that, although Dickens constantly ignores the religious element in man, he is less offensive in this respect than Theodore Hook or Mrs. Trollope, because his is a sin of omission while theirs is one of definite hostility to religion. And not surprisingly, his portraits of aristocrats still do not please many reviewers. Brimley, in the Spectator (24 September 1853, p.924), wonders whether it is because Dickens is ignorant of the lives of such people or whether they offer less than "strikes the eye of a man on the lookout for oddity and point," but whichever reason is the right one, the result in his eyes is the same: Dickens's "people of station are the vilest daubs." The same point is made less vigorously the the Westminster Review (October 1854, Collins p.307); and Fitzjames Stephen, in the Edinburgh Review (July 1857, pp.126-27) and frequently in the Saturday Review, complains bitterly of Dickens's ignorance of the upper classes. Such objections are basically to the lack of truthfulness in Dickens's characters,[19] but the cause is sometimes said to be his ignorance or his own social standing. Mrs. Oliphant, another of Dickens's most obdurate opponents, does not exactly banish him to the middle class, but she suggests such banishment when she says, in Blackwood's Magazine (April 1855, Collins pp.328-29), that he has "become the historian" of

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[19] The criticisms mentioned here are discussed above, pp.83-84.

the class and is unrivalled in the description of its life and members. The implication is that Dickens is out of his depth in any higher sphere, an opinion held by many critics who wrote for journals such as those just mentioned.

A strong attack on Dickens's intellectual powers is made by McCarthy, in the Westminster Review (October 1864, p.417), who believes, like Stephen in the Saturday Review (11 July 1857) quoted above, that Dickens has, in recent novels, mistaken the nature of his powers. He has many talents, one of the most prominent of which is his humour, but he is no philosopher nor moralist nor politician, and, McCarthy says (p.431), he would not be thought of as such did he not claim these roles in some of his Prefaces. At the end of his long article, McCarthy concludes (p.441) that Dickens's intellect is "we will not say ruled, but crushed and dwarfed by his emotional faculties." Partly because of a "defective education" and partly because of a "constitutional bias," he is "unable to take either an extensive or an intensive view of any subject, neither grasping it as a whole, nor thoroughly exhausting any single part." The terms of all this are similar to those of Bagehot, and where Bagehot says that Dickens's genius is unsymmetrical, McCarthy says (pp.437-38) that his "mind is in fragments." He can neither compose a consistent plot nor conduct a philosophical discussion of any kind. In his passages of social criticism he is well-meaning but "very ignorant." Dickens is a comic writer and McCarthy praises him highly both as a wit and as a humorist. He is generous in this respect because he wishes to stress that Dickens has the intellectual capacity to be little more than a writer of funny books.

That the adverse criticism, coming from the critics who place high value on the intellect and on evidence of learning, is uniform in tone and content, may be apparent already. This is seen also in George Stott's

generally unfavourable assessment of Dickens in the Contemporary Review (February 1869). Stott describes Dickens's "theory of life" in its most laughable terms[20] then says (p.223) that he can do no better because he is ignorant of "theology, philosophy, science, history" and his opinions on the nature of social abuses are "vague and uninstructed." Not only is Dickens's work marked by an absence of "loftiness of thought," Stott says (p.222), he does not even appear to believe that there is such a thing, and his unfair descriptions of the profession of the Law and of Parliament show this. His description of Parliamentary business as a struggle between Doodle and Coodle is based, however, not on cynical contempt for political differences, but on "an almost feminine incapacity for grasping abstract notions" and on his "sheer ignorance." Stott goes on to say (p.223), that Dickens "neither understands nor cares for" anything that lies beyond the limits of his own experience. He shows ignorance, prejudice and narrowness of mind, and is therefore totally unqualified for the role of social reformer.

All of this shows clearly that Dickens's social criticism causes a large part of the opposition to him which is directed at his personal capabilities. It is, of course, easy to accuse nineteenth-century critics of unnecessary axe-grinding, but social class distinctions and political opinions were matters of great seriousness to them, and if Dickens so much as touched on such areas, his fiction was naturally given - for better or for worse - its widest possible import. It is assumed that the author has an axe to grind, and even if he has not, reviewers are swift to pounce, because he may unwittingly give a sharper edge to the ideas of those who have. Criticism of his satires and his representations of the aristocracy, therefore, is often couched, harshly, in personal terms.

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[20] See above, p. 169.

Yet, if Dickens may be thought to lack the intellect for a wit and a successful satirist, his intellect is said also to be limited in other ways. Henry James, in the Nation (21 December 1865, Collins p.473) says, for example, that he is a "great observer and a great humorist, but he is nothing of a philosopher," by which he means that Dickens is ignorant of the depths of human nature. He observes and describes externals. James's use of the word "philosophy" has a special sense, but other critics, in charging Dickens with a lack of philosophy, use it in a more general way. Sargent, in the North American Review (October 1853, p.416) says, for example, that Dickens's mind is "essentially deficient in the capacity of taking that broad, philosophical view of his subject" which distinguishes the works of Thackeray. Sargent and James are not embroiled in the English class warfare that colours much of the criticism I have quoted so far, but a number of British critics speak of Dickens's personal limitations as the cause also of his inability to portray human nature in a satisfactory way. In the Roman Catholic Rambler (January 1854, Collins p.294), Stothert blames the age as much as Dickens himself. He is "the product of a restlessly observant but shallow era" and he therefore observes externals rather than delves deeply into human character. Hobart, in Fraser's Magazine (July 1859, p.98) claims that Mr. Pickwick is significant of Dickens's comic powers but also of his lack of "any particular knowledge of human nature[21]," and in the Spectator (24 September 1853, p.924), Brimley feels that Dickens's characterisation is too simplistic He has yet to learn from Nature, he says, "how cunningly she blends motives" and how seldom men and women in real life are entirely absurd or entirely selfish. Dickens's characters, that is, are not felt to

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[21] See below, pp.292-93 for a further reference to this kind of criticism.

be true to life, but the "fault" is not just artistic, but also a matter of the artist's ignorance of human nature. This kind of criticism is carried on in the Spectator by R.H. Hutton, who says (18 June 1870, p.750) that Dickens illustrates, with marvellous fecundity, simple moral traits, a power which only requires a limited knowledge of humanity, but great inventiveness in illustrating them.

On the other hand, however, Dickens's imagination rather than his knowledge may be at fault. The Rambler (January 1862, Collins p.437) thinks that Dickens's comedy is of a low class because of the "mere poverty of an imagination self-restrained to one narrow field of human nature." Dickens chooses to describe absurd, unnatural characters because he will not look for materials in the wider field of general human nature. Taine finds that Dickens's imagination is like a monomania, and Bagehot says that it leads to caricature. But S.F. Williams, in the Rose, Shamrock and Thistle (IV, 1864, p.77), notes a kind of excessive imagination too, but has a completely different attitude to it. The humorous exaggeration of the novels is "perhaps partly owing to the fertility of his rich imagination, to the fruitfulness of his fancy, to the thronging of his brain with glad and thick-coming fantasies, to the very super-abundance and intensity of his conceptions." G.F. Talbot, in Putnam's Monthly Magazine (March 1855, pp.268-69) notes that humour is an instinctive characteristic, "a quality of the imagination and intellect" which gives to the creator's thoughts "the original forms of the grotesque and extravagant." The humorists are those who "cannot tell the most ordinary incident of everyday life, without loading it with comic exaggerations, and making each incident and character express and personate the grotesque creations with which their own fancies are teeming." Placed in this light, Dickens's imaginative powers are not an excess of some weird or unruly character-trait, but the source of his marvellous creativity. The lack of sympathy and understanding shown by

some critics is explained by Whipple, in the Atlantic Monthly (May 1867, Collins pp.478-79), who says that to read of one Dickens's "romances" is to see everything through the author's eyes. When "surveyed through such a medium," the most familiar objects take on an air of strangeness, and his "weird imagination" might alienate some readers were it not connected to "such warmth of heart, keenness of observation, richness of humor, and controlling common sense." Talbot also notes Dickens's kindliness and good nature which, as I shall show, remain strong attractions in his personality despite this emphasis on his imagination. The importance of the imagination is by no means universally accepted. McCarthy, in the Westminster Review (October 1864, p.424), claims that imagination is not always a truth-telling power and that Dickens's imagination, at least, is not; but Walker, in the University Quarterly (January 1860), believes that imaginative creation is superior to mere description of fact. Whether Dickens's knowledge of mankind and life and his imaginative heightening of what he observes is of the highest class is not clear to many reviewers, and it is debated more strongly in the generation after his death. Nevertheless, his comic powers are felt to be imaginative in some degree, or they depend on his sense of the incongruous, and therefore they are partly personal qualities.

But if the tendency to exaggerate and to create grotesque or unnatural characters may be explained by an excess of imagination or a lack of rational control, there is another kind of argument which some reviewers pursue during this period. Brimley, in the Spectator (24 September 1853, p.923), for example, says that intellectual habits "become strengthened by use" and late in a man's life it is hopeless to expect from him "growth of faculty or correction of faults," but the Westminster Review (January 1862, p.288) feels that in his preference for grotesque characters and ugly jargon, Dickens has in fact worsened as he has grown older. These

are the two options for reviewers: either Dickens is set in his ways, or he is deteriorating with age. The Saturday Review (20 July 1861, p.69) uses both options in its review of Great Expectations. Even though the novel evinces " a more profound study of the general nature of human character than Mr. Dickens usually betrays," it still shows one "great fault" that Dickens has always had, that of exaggerating the comic side of or the comic turn of speech in a character, so that all reality fades away. It was not to be supposed, the reviewer says, that Dickens would suddenly shake this fault off. Dickens ought, however, to "have the thanks of the wearied public, and the admiration of those who know how hard it is to observe when the first zest of observation is passed away, and how much courage and resolution it demands to note the comic in life and manners amid the tragedy and farce of declining years." Later, in its obituary of Dickens, the Saturday Review (11 June 1870, p.760) repeats that Dickens did not improve as he grew older, and in a review of Edwin Drood it suggests (17 September 1870, p.369) that the youthful power of creating grotesque characters such as Honeythunder did not come easy to a man of over fifty. Most men grow more solemn as they grow old, and the tendency to exaggerate in a fanciful manner is seen as a youthful habit which may even be slightly ridiculous in an ageing man. G.B. Woods, in the Old and New Magazine (November 1870, p.532), claims that the growing gravity of demeanour which can be traced in Dickens's portraits "from Maclise's down" may "perhaps be followed in the novels." After Dickens's death, such a comment may be natural, but the Saturday Review in 1861 suspects his decline through old age at a time when he was only forty-nine years old. The attempt is, of course, to make him seem older than he is and his career to seem to have lasted longer than it had,[22] to support with

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[22] Perhaps this explains Stephen's elementary mistake when he says, in the Saturday Review (8 May 1858, Mordell p.163) that Pickwick Papers was first published about the year 1832 or 1833.

some subtlety the feeling that he had outlived his usefulness and had outgrown the special powers which had made him so successful as a youth.

Clearly, too, the high-spirited comedy is felt to be the expression of Dickens's personal powers and any literary change is felt to be caused by a corresponding personal development. Those who defend Dickens do so in similar terms. The Literary Gazette (13 July 1861, p.32) however, protests against those who find a decline in his work. A writer does not necessarily go on improving, the reviewer says, and he may not still exhibit, in his maturity, "the buoyancy, the recklessness, and the rollicking gaiety of youth." People who demand this of him are being unreasonable. They would not, the reviewer says, expect such consistency of their wives and husbands, so why should they demand it of a novelist, who is, after all, a human being and subject to change like everyone else. For this reviewer there is no decline, but a maturing into a better novelist, as others were to say in this period.[23] Bagehot, too, uses the word "maturity," but his comment is a veiled insult, when he says, in the National Review (October 1858, loc.cit p.211) that Dickens's humour is not what it was as "we will not say age, but maturity has passed over his powers." For Bagehot, Dickens's humour has lessened, but he still paints the "painful minutiae of social abuses, which are now no longer softened by its presence.

Generally Bagehot and others ignore the merits of Dickens's works, or at least overshadow them with discussions of his faults. This leads Dickens's defenders to adopt the opposite strategy and ignore the faults yet make much of his merits. The London Review (28 October 1865, Collins pp.454-55) says, for example, that the faults of Dickens's work are as obvious as ever, but to rail at them is a "simple waste of time."

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[23] See above, pp. 25,152.

Value is found in Dickens's humour, in which "the energy of youth yet remains" and is "united with the deeper insight of maturer years." The tendency to explain both Dickens's merits and his defects of art in personal terms is clear. What is more important at this stage is that humour like his is seen to be a youthful quality. In the generation after his death there is even more emphasis on this idea of youthful high spirits as well as on Alfred Austin's idea of animal spirits mentioned above.[24]

Some support for Dickens still comes through traditional lines such as the arguments in favour of his kindness and the delight with which his personal presence in his works is noticed. Many of the journals which praise Dickens for his emotional qualities are, in the latter part of his career, the less intellectually-demanding, more religious or heavily moral journals. For example, the Young Englishwoman (9 December 1865, p.381) praises as one of his "best moral qualities" his love of human kindness because this is one of the attitudes, no doubt, that the reviewer wishes to encourage in the magazine's young readers. The Christian Spectator (December 1865, p.721) similarly says that Dickens is never "merely the humourist" because he has a "kindly affectionate nature," and so on. Such comments are commonplace in the obituaries, of course. Arthur Helps, in Macmillan's Magazine (July 1870, Collins p.530),says that Dickens's "own kindness of nature" may be seen in most of his characters, of which there are only a few cases - for example, Jonas Chuzzlewit - where Dickens "has succeeded in denuding the character of any trait belonging to himself." The Daily News (10 June 1870, p.5) praises his "genial satire, his kindly and gentle humour, his hearty love of human nature," and The Times of the same date speaks of his "eminently kindly nature." Even the satirist,so often criticised in recent years, is said by Fraser's Magazine (July 1870, Collins p.528) to have laughed

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[24] p.225.

at mankind "entirely without bitterness or ill nature." The tendency of obituarists to paint their subject in his best colours is frequently in evidence in such comments.

Also present in some obituaries is the feeling that Dickens expressed his personality through his works or was clearly visible somehow in them. Fraser's Magazine (July 1870, Collins p.527) claims that in his novels, "the author, scene-painter, stage-manager, and moreover the whole company, tragic and comic, male and female, from 'stars' to 'supers,' [were] one and the same skilful individual." The personal presence of the author is simply described with, seemingly, no awareness of his many personae. Less controversial is the comment in the Illustrated London News (18 June 1870, p.639) that readers have now been deprived of "the agreeable sense of being directly addressed by this man of genius, this man of feeling and intelligence." Perhaps these are things that might be expected in obituaries, but similar statements are to be found elsewhere earlier. For example, Talbot, in the Putnam's Monthly Magazine (March 1855, p.268), having also paid tribute to the "candor and goodness" of the author, ends up saying (p.272) that, "No man can write as frankly as Dickens has done, without revealing the hue and quality of his own spirit. Judging from his works, he is a man void of pride and of malice, full of kindness and cheerfulness, more to be loved than admired," and, that "No man could invent and appreciate such rare natures as those of the two Peggotties,John Jarndyce and sweet Esther Summerson, without being himself kindred in soul to the characters he describes." The Examiner (28 October 1865, p.682) says, in its concluding paragraph to a review of Our Mutual Friend,that all of the scenes and characters are tinged with the "observer's humour," that is, "with his own character contained in the suggestions of them," and in the North American Review (April 1868, pp.671-72) C.E. Norton adds, "No one thinks first of

Mr. Dickens as a writer. He is at once, through his books, a friend. . . . it is not in his purely literary character that he has done most for us, it as as a man of the largest humanity, who has simply used literature as the means by which to bring himself into relation with his fellow-men, and to inspire them with something of his own sweetness, kindness, charity, and good will."

But on this topic too, those who decry Dickens have their representative in Mrs. Oliphant who says, in Blackwood's Magazine (April 1855, Collins p.329), that Dickens has "unveiled himself from that personal obscurity which softens so gracefully the presence of a great writer. He has ceased to speak his strictures or to pronounce his approbation out of that mist of half-disclosed identity which becomes the literary censor. He is less the author of Pickwick, of Copperfield . . . than he is Charles Dickens; and we confess that we cannot regard him with the same affection or the same indulgence in the latter character as in the former." Dickens offends because of his opinions and attitudes, but he also seems to force himself upon readers. While many celebrate the kindly personal tone of the novels, those who dislike Dickens resent his intrusions and find them inartistic.

Largely, by the end of his career, the critical audience has split into two halves. On one side, there are those who find that he does not satisfy their intellectual demands and appears to be a clumsy artist, not to mention his attacks on the aristocracy and its interests. On the other side there are those who admire his moral teaching and his expression and encouragement of right emotions, and those who appreciate his imaginative and creative powers and see more need for them than for high intellect in fiction. There are, however, already attacks on his imagination because of a distrust of the imagination in some cases, but also because his imagination does not seem to recreate reality in an acceptable way. In the generation after his death, these kinds of criticisms become even more at odds with each other.

The Generation After Dickens : 1871 - 1906

Near the end of the period under survey, Frederic Harrison in Forum (January 1895, p.544) complains that"there is perhaps a wider sympathy with Charles Dickens as a person than with any other writer of our time. For this reason there has been hardly any serious criticism or estimate of Dickens as a great artist, apart from some peevish and sectional disparagement of his genius, which has been too much tinged with academic pedantry and the bias of aristocratic temper or political antagonism." This is, of course, unfair to the many previous critics who had genuinely attempted to come to grips with Dickens's art, even if they had been mainly concerned with its truth to life and moral or practical teaching. But Harrison notes correctly the personal tone of much of the criticism, and whether Dickens's work is felt to be acceptable or unacceptable, critics attempt to find personal or biographical causes for his success or failure. During his lifetime, certain biographical facts were known, but in comparison to what Forster reveals in this period, they were few. While he was alive, it was natural that people should wish to know what kind of man he was and to seek in his works clues to his personality. After Forster, the particular nature of his works is often thought to be caused by the circumstances of his upbringing and both his opponents and his defenders find fuel for their criticisms in the now known biographical details.

Forster helps to solidify the main currents of criticism, as he frequently discusses Dickens's geniality, his powers of observation, his imagination, his kindly sympathies, his moral purpose, and, most importantly, his humour. All of this may be found in the Examiner's reviews of individual novels over the years, and Forster quotes liberally from them. This means that the ideas of typical friendly earlier criticism are given continued currency in a period in which there is much in the

literary world that is hostile to them. This has two results: the qualities for which Dickens was valued remain valid for some critics who, in effect, are adhering to the qualities of an earlier era; and Dickens is seen, by hostile critics especially, to be dated. The ferocity of the attacks made upon him leads largely to the kind of polarisation of opinion noted by Harrison, but Harrison's solution - to ignore the faults and concentrate on the undoubted merits of Dickens's work - is shared by an increasing number of critics.

Harrison notes two things: sympathy with Dickens as a person, and opposition based on academic pedantry, aristocratic and political bias. The first of these is caused by the tone of Forster's work, and by the tone of, for example, obituarists like Sala and Helps, who had lost a friend, but it is also caused by the distinctly personal tone of Dickens's works. He used them as a means of communicating with his public, and several critics note the loss of a friend to the public. Quamoclit, in St. James's Magazine (April 1879, p.284) is still trying to explain the "universal mourning" that surrounded Dickens's death. The country felt, he says, that "it had lost a friend in the departed writer. For Dickens had, by means of his pen, constituted himself the companion of the grave and gay alike." At the end of a long chapter on Dickens, Davey (1876, p.155) says that he feels as if he "had just parted with a friend . . . who has taken us into his confidence, and introduced us to the companions of his soul, and to the merry, laughing, tricksy children of his brain." And as late as 1887, Hunt (pp.459-60) calls Dickens's humour " a natural flow of genuine good-will, by which the reader is made the author's friend." Comedy - most especially humour, in this period - is not the sole, but it is an important cause of Dickens's "personal" appeal. Howells, who is in no danger of falling under any illusion created by Dickens, says, in Harper's Monthly Magazine (July 1902,

p.312),that few could read Dickens's works without feeling an admiration for him which "survived distinct proofs of his peccability."

Howells suggests that the "friendly" appeal is only a literary illusion, but by far the majority of critics believe that Dickens is "in" his books, that they are an expression of his personal qualities and experiences. Forster gives the lead for this kind of criticism when he reveals the autobiographical content of David Copperfield and says that various characters in the novels were moulded on real people Dickens knew. Moreover, he goes to great lengths to show that Dickens was the kindly, beneficent man he appears to be in his novels, and he quotes liberally from letters[25] and tells anecdotes to prove that Dickens was a man with a great sense of humour, among other things. He says (Life, II p.263), "His literary work was so intensely one with his nature that he is not separable from it, and the man and the method throw a singular light on each other." But not all of the influence came from Forster's approach. The tendency to seek personal qualities in the works is a very old one, and some critics, dissatisfied with Forster's biography, feel, with the Scottish Review (December 1883, p.128),that the novels are sufficient materials for the reader to work with in order to find out what manner of man Dickens was. But the Life generally leads to the conclusion, expressed by G.B. Smith, in the Gentleman's Magazine (March 1874, p.301), that more than most writers, Dickens's personality is stamped on his books, and it leads to the kind of statement - made so often by others - found in Alfred Welsh's Development of English Literature and Language (1882, p.450), that Dickens's "style" is "On the whole, spontaneous, easy, free, idiomatic; now simple and vivid, now partaking the genial flow of spirits, the full, abundant tide of life, which runs

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[25] The publication of the Letters (1880-82) reinforces the impression Forster gives, too. See the Dublin Review (April 1880, Collins p.596).

through the man." I have emphasized the final word of this quotation because it shows that the literary is drawn back to the author's personal qualities.

Welsh, however, notes qualities which are frequently connected with Dickens's comedy in other criticisms. He does not mention solely personal qualities, but a personal bias may be observed in his mention of the flow of genial spirits, and the tide of life running through Dickens. The "spontaneous" quality of the works is felt to be the result of Dickens's energy and high spirits. Seemingly the most spontaneous and high-spirited of the novels, is Pickwick Papers. Topp, in the Melbourne Review (July 1881, p.270), sees it as the first fresh outpourings of his genial spirit, and Leslie Stephen (1888, p.927) makes a similar observation. Stephen adds (p.931) that David Copperfield still shows similar qualities to those indicated by the early novel, and that if Dickens lost his "fun" as he became more of a satirist, he at least never lost his vigour. The later satires are not "strengthened by additional insight," however, and it seems that vigour is no substitute for the knowledge which Dickens does not have. Comments on his high-spiritedness are common throughout this period, as indeed they had been all his life. But after Forster's revelations of his boyhood misery, his high spirits are seen in a different light. Forster says (Life, I p.35) that throughout his early misfortune Dickens never lost his "precious gift of animal spirits" and his "native capacity for humorous enjoyment." The suggestion is that his natural buoyancy of spirits and his sense of humour protected him during the period in which he could have become irretrievably distressed and depraved. As Rands says, in the Contemporary Review (July 1880),[26] the sense of humour may protect men against fatalism and pessimism, and this is certainly what

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[26] See above, p. 188.

is felt to have happened to Dickens at least. Dawson (1905, pp.102-4) summarises this kind of argument when he says that humour kept Dickens from despair because he could laugh rather than cry at life. He was naturally an optimist who looked on the sunny side of life and could not even be depressed by what he saw in the Marshalsea. Humour, Dawson says, is a "species of grace" by which men are saved from the "pit of pessimism." But more important than humour, as far as Dickens's art goes, is his vivid imagination which Dawson (p.107) calls "the cardinal quality of his art." This raises the whole question of Dickens's powers of observation and imagination, which is an extremely complex matter and may only be touched on here.

The power of observation is felt to be a natural power which Dickens was born with. His imagination was stimulated by his father, by his "cousin"James Lamert, and by his reading of the eighteenth century novelists,the Arabian Nights, and so on. Details like these are provided by Forster and reiterated ad nauseam by others.[27] The young Dickens, possessed with these gifts, roamed the London streets and fantasized reality just as he was later to do in his novels. Things he experienced then are either directly described in his works, or they are heightened by his artistic imagination. His early experiences gave him a knowledge of men and life and a sympathy with the poor and the outcasts of society, whose experiences Dickens had shared. For those who admire his social teaching, his sympathy with unfortunates, and his imaginative transcending of often sordid realities, here are the sources, in his early experiences, of his particular kind of fiction. His comedy is also felt to have its sources back in the dim days of his early struggles.

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[27] It would be too complex a matter, as well as unnecessary, to illustrate these ideas. Forster's account is well known, and the details appear in almost every subsequent biographical account that I have read.

Gissing (1902, p.18) and Dawson (1905, p.102) suggest the influence of John Dickens on his son's comic powers and his "happy temperament," but whatever the cause of their flourishing in his youth and in his later life and career, they are most commonly felt to be natural to him, like his high spirits. Indeed, high spirits and comedy are often put in harness with each other, as in Forster's statement quoted above. David Pryde (1879, p.428) too, says that the sources of his humour "are those exuberant animal spirits which make him pull his characters into odd attitudes, plant them down among the most unexpected circumstances, put the most whimsical sayings in their mouths and envelop the whole in a sunny atmosphere of geniality." Davey (1876, p.123) makes the personal causes of the comic art even clearer: "Gifted originally with a joyous temperament, great animal spirits, and a keen sense of the ludicrous, he has been enabled to show us the fun, frolic, and sunny side of human life." Dickens is felt to have been born a happy man because his books reveal a happy world.

Here it might be worthwhile to digress a little to consider again the fate of the later novels. When they were published they were not as widely liked as the early works, and various causes for their inferiority had been advanced, one of the most prominent being that Dickens was losing the high spirits of his youth. But the early, exuberant, fun-loving Dickens remained the most popular, and this pattern continues throughout the generation after his death. Forster feels more comfortable with the early works, as does Andrew Lang who believes that, from Dombey and Son on, Dickens was overworked. He adds, in Good Words (April 1888, p.236), that the later satires are inferior not because Dickens was out of his depth in the subjects with which he dealt, but because he was "not in the humour for them." Robert Carruthers (1879) speaks at length of the early novels and gives extracts - even from

Pictures from Italy, - but merely lists (p.521) the novels after Bleak House. Chesterton (1906), of course, prefers the early Dickens and says that if he became a better realist and novelist in his later works, he became less like Dickens and less of a creator (p.138). The later novels lose out in two ways : their social satire is not good enough, and their greater seriousness is not solemn enough for the Naturalists and others, who find him ignorant and frivolous; but for those who prefer gaiety and happiness, they seem too depressing. Dickens's famous qualities are his high spirits and his comedy, and both are seen to be lacking in the later novels.

Both are, too, personal qualities. More than most other literary modes, humour is felt to be personal. One cannot imagine a humourless man writing a humorous book, and the impression of high spirits in the novels seem to come from the author's high spirits. All of the comments about his "native" or "natural" humour already quoted give this impression, and the phrases "sense of humour," "sense of fun," and "sense of the ludicrous," of course, suggest a natural power. Forster (Life, II p.272) calls humour Dickens's "highest faculty" and Hunt (1887, p.457), although he cannot agree that it is necessarily his highest faculty, does admit that it was "an organic part of the man." Walter Irving, in Charles Dickens (1874, reprint[28] p.174), claims that "the humourist is born; the wit is manufactured," and he prefers the naturalness of the humorist to the artificiality of the wit. Humour, for him as for many others, is the expression of a personal quality, and Dickens's humour is the expression of a number of qualities. We never hear of "the born symbolist" because symbolism, like wit, is assumed to emerge through literary endeavour. Dickens, the impression is given, writes easily and spontaneously and without a great degree of literary polish. As L'Estrange

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[28] Extract in Kitton, op.cit., pp.172-75.

(1878, p.235) says, Dickens wrote too swiftly to be able to achieve the kind of perfection and conciseness that the true wit aims for.

Dickens is criticised by some critics for his lack of "literary" qualities, and the boyhood reading and the lack of education described by Forster are taken to show that Dickens was no intellectual, and that if he fails to appeal to more discerning readers it is because he has an uncultivated mind. I shall return to these critics in a moment, but Dickens's adherents place in opposition to these supposed defects his knowledge of life rather than of books, his redeeming sympathy for his fellowmen, his imaginative powers and the vitality of his writings. They do not claim intellectual powers for him. One of the very few to argue that he has the more intellectual comic mode of wit is Alice Meynell, in the Atlantic Monthly (January 1903, p.54), but the question is not controversial, and Dickens's excellence is found elsewhere.

Almost everything is explained in personal terms. He knew nothing of books, but his early involvement with life gained him knowledge and sympathy, "the seeing eye and the feeling heart," as Marzials (1887, pp.37-38) puts it. He had suffered as a child and he felt sorry for others who suffered. His early reading spurred his imagination and the books remained, as Gissing (1902, pp.25-26) says, "dear to his memory and to his imagination." As a little boy, Dickens walked about London, according to Buchanan, in St. Paul's Magazine (February 1872, p.140), observing all the dark places and scenes of suffering, and so vivid were the scenes he saw that they impressed his mind forever. Buchanan suggests that the vision of society Dickens gained as a child remained with him throughout the rest of his life, that in fact he never grew up, but continued to observe with the dreaming and not quite comprehending eyes of a child. The world seemed odd then, and Dickens never stopped seeing it as odd, or making it so when it was not. As the reviewer in

the Spectator (29 December 1877, p.1651) says, his power of observation was completely subservient"to his keen sense of the ridiculous." Whether it is comic imaginative heightening or imaginative heightening that is also comic, or whether it is truthful description of his surroundings, the general impression is that Dickens gained from his earliest days the trick of looking at the world in the way that he does, and that his novels are the expression of his personality and his vision. The cause of the literary is almost invariably sought in the personal nature or experience of the artist. Reality is transformed by his art, but his art is a highly personal quality. Davey (1876, p.153) says that "Dickens's humour coloured, more or less the whole of his writings; not only were external objects reflected in his mind, but his mind was reflected in them as well. He held the mirror up to nature, but the mirror was his own soul, which reflected back . . . its brightness upon everything around him." A man's sense of humour is his own; it cannot be learned or taught, and the value of Dickens's art is therefore that it is original. While a writer like Stevenson might study painfully to perfect his style, Dickens's art seems effortless. Perhaps it is technically inferior, but it is refreshingly original. While pessimists and fatalists like Gissing and Hardy write about gloomy subjects, Dickens gives the air of being an optimist and his works exude happiness. These are the values that critics in this period note in Dickens's works, and most of the values are said to be the result of his personal character constructed from the novels or via Forster and other biographers.

There are not many attempts to defend Dickens as a stylist or as the creator of cohesive artistic wholes. Alice Meynell's article mentioned above, in addition to her earlier ones in the Pall Mall Magazine (11 and 18 July 1899, pp.3), are unusual in that they focus attention solely on a literary quality - Dickens's style. Others do note aesthetic qualities,

and W.E. Henley (1902, p.7), finding artistic improvement as Dickens's career progresses, says that Our Mutual Friend should be taken as a model by aspiring artists who, he complains, too often look to France for their inspiration. As G.H. Ford says,[29] Henley's interests run counter to those of his time, and it is evident that if he likes this novel then he certainly runs counter to many favourable critics. Pickwick Papers is, he says (p.6), full of freshness and fun, "mainly due to high spirits," but whereas others continue to praise the early novels for qualities that eternally appeal, Henley sees them as a stage which Dickens quickly developed from. Apart from artistic incompetence, the faults of the novels are seen, by favourable critics, to be caused by a kind of overflowing of the author's spirits. His imagination knew no bounds, or, as Omond (1900, p.116) puts it, " A jester like Hood, Dickens was also master of an imagination which outstripped and outsoared reality." Omond, who does not discuss the matter, suggests that Dickens was in control of his imagination, but the feeling given by the references to high spirits elsewhere is that he could not control the qualities that went to the making of his particular kind of art.

Nor, in the field of comedy, is it always felt to be necessary that he should control it. Saintsbury (1895, pp.130-31) finds the secret of Dickens's failure in an "utter absence of the sense of limit." Dickens, he says, had no power of self-criticism, and always went too far in everything he did - his pathos, his satire, and his egotism, for example. Forster had revealed the extent to which Dickens was bound up in his works, how his characters were almost realities to him, and how he exulted at the success of his works. George Bentley, in the Temple Bar Magazine (May 1873, p.172), is one of those who protest that Forster shows Dickens up as too self-centred, and the criticism seems to have stuck, because it is repeated by Saintsbury, and Omond (1900, p.113), a few pages earlier from

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[29] Loc.cit. p.238.

his comment quoted above, says that Dickens is the same in his pathos as in his "fun". He is "the same quickly responding, easily exaggerating nature, too emotional to comprehend the satiety produced on his readers by his laboured sentiment as by the stereotyped catchwords denoting his comic characters." Dickens ought to have controlled an aspect of his comedy, according to Omond, just as Forster (Life, II p.273) admits that there was the occasional excess of exaggeration which Dickens failed to control. But both Forster and Omond are tolerant, whereas Saintsbury may scarcely be said to be so. He praises (p.130) in Dickens's work his "pure fantastic humour," and suggests by his praise that it need not be curbed. However much Dickens may err elsewhere in his excess, in his "fun" he may go as far as he wishes. The reason for this is that Saintsbury does not see Dickens as a great artist. He is a jester and a funster, but "serious" art needs to show higher intellectual calibre and greater artistic control.

Most of the adverse critics emphasise Dickens's mind, because it is in intellectual powers that he seems to be most deficient and they therefore have a convenient lever for their attacks. Their attacks are also provoked by their desire for a more intellectual kind of fiction like that offered by George Eliot, Meredith and Hardy. G.H. Ford offers an excellent account of the critical movements in this period[30] and a mere summary is all that is needed here. He quotes (p.196) Edward Dowden, in the Fortnightly Review (1887, p.843), saying that more is needed from the novel than mere high spirits and optimism, and he makes a list (p.229) of the things that the critics found wrong with Dickens's art. Although some of these things are aesthetic matters they are almost all traced to deficiencies in Dickens's qualifications as a novelist. His ignorance and lack of education make his criticism of society childish, misinformed and fatuously optimistic; his absence of self-

[30] ibid. Chapters 10, 11, 12.

criticism and his untrained mind - cf. Bagehot's earlier idea of unsymmetrical genius[31] - lead to artistic faults such as improbabilities, sensationalism and an inability to analyse human nature; he has nothing to say to educated readers because of his lack of education.[32] One thing mentioned by Ford that has direct relevance to the comedy is that Dickens "is a mere entertainer, not an artist" in the eyes of many critics of the period. As I shall show in the next chapter, Dickens is constantly dismissed as a humorist - even a great humorist - with the suggestion that a humorist is no more than a mere entertainer. Dickens's mental qualities and artistic powers, however, are often said to be suited to humour and no more. The "fault"lies in him, and as much as Dickens's supporters find attractive personal qualities, his opponents find personal defects.

R.H. Hutton, a frequent champion of Dickens's humour, in fact has a fairly low opinion of his intellectual powers. Humour, he points out in the Spectator (7 February 1874, p.169), depends on Dickens's "momentary flashes of perception" and not on any power of "taking pains," in an intellectual sense, with his art. No knowledge of "the passions of the heart and intellect of man" is evidenced, but only a knowledge of "a superficial stratum of real life." Hutton sees Dickens as a "vivid dreamer" who did not describe life as it ordinarily is but always made scenes and characters extraordinary and special as if seeing them in a kind of dream. He had no "city of the mind," Hutton says (p.170), into which he could withdraw from external stimuli. Reviewing Forster's Life in the same issue, he adds (p.175) that even Dickens's humour lacks "repose." He cannot withdraw into himself, but must keep tugging at his

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[31] See above, p. 223.

[32] Here I paraphrase and slightly re-order Ford's list, which is based on Lewes's (1872) article.

comic conceptions, always with an eye to effect. Or, as Saintsbury puts it (loc.cit.), Dickens has an "absence of the sense of limit." Where favourable critics praise his animal spirits and his vigour, unfavourable critics merely find that he overdoes things. This feeling of Dickens's overdoing matters is attributable to an excessive imagination, a charge which Forster defends him against as best he can, but most adverse critics prefer to follow Lewes, it seems. From the time of Poe's article in Graham's Magazine (May 1841) through to Forster's Life, it had been a favourite tactic of pro-Dickensian critics to stress his imagination and his artistic transcending of the real. From the time of Taine onwards, an attack on Dickens's imagination was possible, but the major proponent of such an attack is Lewes.

Dickens's power of imagination was not denied, but the quality and value of it were. Whereas Taine sees it in terms of his idea of "monomania," Lewes, in the Fortnightly Review (February 1872, reprint[33] p.59), sees it as a kind of "hallucination." He says (p.63) that "the world of thought and passion lay beyond his horizon," that Dickens could stir only emotions and not thoughts in his readers (p.68), and that this was because he himself possessed merely "animal intelligence." It must be noted that Lewes replaces "intelligence" for "spirits" in the usual phrase used to describe Dickens. He says further (p.69) that Dickens's lack of early education starved no "intellectual ambition" because he "was not and never would have been a student," and he goes on to make the famous observation (p.70) about Dickens's bookshelves - that they contained three-volume novels and travel-books, mostly presentation copies." These and many others of his gibes are congenial to later "superfine" critics, who repeat them during the rest of the period. Leslie Stephen (1888, p.935) refers to the idea of "hallucination," and Lilly (1895, pp.17-18) seems to have a mixture of both

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[33] loc.cit.

Taine and Lewes in his statement that Dickens's "violent and lurid imagination, fixed upon one object, became a kind of possession." Griffin, in the Irish Monthly (September 1896, pp.495-98) calls Dickens a monomaniac with a vivid imagination, and claims that this superabundance of imagination is a fault in the works, because Dickens becomes too restlessly excited with his works. He is too much involved imaginatively and personally to exert the proper amount of artistic control. Later (October 1896, pp.546-48), he says that A Tale of Two Cities is Dickens's best work because it describes a world in turmoil, a world which suits Dickens's restless mind. Artist and subject are one, and Dickens's imagination and personality do not intrude, but are submerged in the art.

None of these critics pays adequate attention to Dickens's comedy because it is not considered to be serious art. Lilly, indeed, discusses Dickens as a humorist, but he is most intent on showing (p.27) that he has "grave limitations and defects" chiefly attributable to his want of "early intellectual culture." Reluctantly he admits (p.17) that he has "vigour and originality" but even this is only because Dickens's "ignorance of the great literary traditions of the Western world threw him back upon himself, upon his own observation, his own experience, his own creative gift." The only difference between a humorist and any other artist, according to Lilly (p.6), is that he treats of the subjects that others treat of, in a playful manner. Dickens certainly has the playful manner, but he does not have the other qualities which make him a great artist.[34] On this question of literary culture, Andrew Lang says, in Good Words (April 1888, pp.236-37), that Dickens's childhood reading exactly suited the novels he was to write. Dickens was at home, because of it, in inns, on the road, and in hospitable houses. Yet, Lang also says that Dickens

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[34] For further discussion of Lilly's definition, see above p. 18, and for his estimate of Dickens's stature, see below p. 318.

owed nothing to literature. His taste was perhaps formed by his early reading, but thereafter he learned from Nature, and he owed his successes to "native genius and hard work." No doubt, he concludes, this makes him less than acceptable to "the literary class," but he is popular with the public because of "his heart, his mirth, his observation, his delightful high spirits, his intrepid loathing of wrong, his chivalrous desire to right it." Lang summarises here most of the things favourable critics found valuable in Dickens, and they are all seen as personal qualities. On the question of his early reading, the Scottish Review (December 1883, pp.128-29) says that it encouraged his imagination which was thereafter not balanced by the kind of rational development achievable in scholarly pursuits, and Harrison, in Forum (January 1895, p.550), feels that ultimately Dickens's "utter severance from books" will tell against his own.

His lack of intellectual training is seen most obviously in his satire. Even Gissing (1902, p.22) says that Hard Times has faults which "must, in some degree, be attributed to Dickens's lack of acquaintance with various kinds of literature, with various modes of thought." The theme, he says, is admirable, but the manner of presentation "betrays an extraordinary naivete, plainly due to untrained intellect, a mind insufficiently stored." Whipple, in the Atlantic Monthly (March 1877, Collins pp.317-18), also generally a favourable critic, asserts Dickens's ignorance in this novel. Dickens does not understand Bounderby and therefore only describes him from the outside. In his successful characters, Dickens knows them from the inside and can describe them as real people, but a character such as Bounderby is no more than a "personified abstraction." Whipple's criticism is interesting because he speaks of the comic writer's method - if in elementary terms - but basically he believes that Dickens's lack of training in the fields of political, social and legal science holds him

back as a satirist in the later novels. He should, Whipple says, have "contented himself with using his great powers of observation, sympathy, humour, imagination, and characterization" in their right ways, and not taken on questions that he did not understand. All of these things listed are not literary elements, they are personal powers, it appears, and the suggestion is that intellect is on quite a different plane altogether. According to James Oliphant (1899, pp.36-37), it was Dickens's imagination that helped lead him astray in the satire of the Poor Law in Oliver Twist: Dickens formed a hasty and superficial opinion and because he "was no thinker" he was prompted, by his sympathy for the pauper, into evolving scenes out of his imagination and passing them off as facts.

That Harrison (quoted at the beginning of this section) is right when he says that opposition to Dickens is caused partly by the bias of aristocratic temper, is indicated by the frequency with which Dickens's satire of the upper classes is attacked and defended. Literary and social class are not always kept distinct. Saintsbury (1895, p.125) calls Dickens a middle class Englishman who also had genius, and in 1896 (p.147) he adds that Dickens's knowledge "was very limited; his logical faculties were not strong; and while constantly attempting to satirize the upper classes, he knew extremely little about them." He did have, however, a "wonderfully accurate" knowledge of the lower and middle classes. W.H. Mallock, in Forum (December 1892, p.510) says, indeed, that he had no real knowledge even of the upper ranks of the middle class, and the debate that was alive in Dickens's time continues throughout the generation after his death. When the London Quarterly Review (January 1871, pp.274-75) makes the charge that Dickens cannot draw a gentlemen, it is aware that there had been opposition to it, but the critic says that there is nevertheless some justice in the charge. His idea of a gentleman is of a person

of "fineness of disposition and superior elegance of soul," and Dickens can only create good, genial, charitable people. Mrs. Oliphant, in Blackwood's Magazine (June 1887, p.756), claims that Dickens is an uncultivated humorist who is "at his least best" in the company of ladies and gentlemen. The suggestion is that an artist's materials as well as his treatment of them may decide his literary stature. High class characters help to ensure a high class of fiction. Soberly, Dickens's defenders point out that he can describe a gentleman. Ward (1882, pp.220-21) says that Twemlow and Sir Leicester Dedlock are gentlemen, while Lord Verisopht and Cousin Feenix, though foolish, are nevertheless gentlemanly. Ward, Davey (1876, p.143) and Lang, in the Fortnightly Review (December 1898, p.143), all suspect that Dickens had no intention of drawing a gentleman and that if they are artificial figures in many cases, Dickens had a reason for it, but they do not discuss what the reason might have been. Marzials (1887, p.148) still has to point out that Dickens is not vulgar merely because he deals with vulgar subjects. The subject may be vulgar, but the treatment never is. Marzials realises that this defence had been made long before, but it is incredible that so many critics still make the charge. The suggestion is that Dickens cannot describe an aristocrat because he is no aristocrat himself. Even Chesterton (1906) has to take up the question, and defend Dickens's use of Fools.[35] The idea occurs to him, as it had occurred at times to others,[36] that the use of lower class characters is likely in comedy - as in Shakespeare's comedies. Yet the question of the social standing of Dickens's comic characters troubles many critics - even Gissing, who explains (1902, p.120) that Dickens's idea of a gentleman is of one who

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[35] See above, pp.192-93 for his discussion of Toots.

[36] e.g. Buchanan, in St. Paul's Magazine (February 1872, p.143).

"derives his patent of gentility from Almighty God." Dickens found such people abundantly among the lower classes, he says. And the alleged ignorance of the attacks on the aristocracy still worries Swinburne, in the Quarterly Review (July 1902, pp.28-29), who says that he was definitely ignorant of some matters, but that he was also, at times, successful in his satire of social pretensions. But Chesterton is not consistent in his stand. He says, (p.176), that though "cads" have said that Dickens could now draw a gentleman, it is "like saying that he never described a zebra." This suggests that Dickens never wanted to, but Chesterton also says at another point (pp.152-53) that Dickens drew his aristocrats better later in life when he had mixed in higher social circles.

But this whole question of the social and literary class of the writer who describes mainly lower class characters and often satirises the aristocracy, and the question of the intellectual capacity of a man who does not describe intellectuals, are extreme examples of the tendency to seek the cause of the literary in the personal. Everything that happened to Dickens is thought to have some literary effect. For Gissing (1902, p.37), even acting in Jonson's Every Man in his Humour strengthened Dickens's tendency towards grotesque observation, and the only critic I have discovered who casts some doubt on the personal causes of the literary effect, does so unwittingly. Andrew Lang, in the Fortnightly Review (December 1898, p.959), discusses the passage in Forster in which it is stated that Dickens took himself and his works very seriously, with "the intensity and tenacity with which he recognised, realised, comtemplated, cultivated, and thoroughly enjoyed his own individuality." This self-centredness, against which others object, is felt by Lang to have prevented Dickens from being the humorist in real life that he was in his writings. His letters and Forster's anecdotes show him to be full of high spirits only,

and not the softness of humour.[37] But Lang says this near the end of his article, and he does not discuss the humour of the novels as a literary effect. Indeed, the mere fact that he is speaking at this stage of Dickens as a person shows that his intention in saying what he says is not literary, and he does not question the tendency to see Dickens's humour as an expression of his own sense of humour.

Chesterton offers very little novelty in this area. He too finds the secrets of Dickens's art in his childhood misery and his natural powers. He suggests (p.30) the influence of John Dickens on his son, and he claims (p.28) that Humphry Clinker and Tom Jones influenced the budding comic writer. The little Dickens was possessed of great imaginative powers with which he transformed reality, or, as Chesterton says (p.42), "Dickensized London." Dickens did not, he says (p.45), look back on his childhood scenes and see how delightful they were despite the fact that he had been miserable, but rather "he was delighted at the same moment that he was desperate." His soul was not a compound colour like grey, caused by no element being quite itself, but it was "like a shot silk of black and crimson, a shot silk of misery and joy." He took in tragedy and gave out comedy, and Chesterton argues (p.44) that these two things can "run parallel in the same personality." The "born optimist" (p.43) can be both happy and unhappy at the same time and Dickens was therefore able to lay up the memories of which his later books are made. Partly it was observation, but even more importantly, it was his comic vision that was developing. And so Chesterton goes on, for the first three chapters at least, showing that the achievements of the later Dickens are rooted solidly in his early life. Most of the information comes from Forster, and his merits are that he does much more colourfully and in a far

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[37] See above, p. 10. Lang characterises humour by its qualities of love, melancholy, etc.

more entertaining manner what so many had done before him, and that he links most of it to the growth of the comic writer.

Dickens is also seen as the product of his age. This tendency arises most strongly as the Dickens era gets further and further away, and as literary tastes and social fashions change. Dickens the satirist, it is often felt, was able to be more effective in his time than any satirist could hope to be in the late-century; his pathos appealed to his earlier audiences as they do not in the late century; the humanitarian novel, as Cross (1899) calls it, was in vogue when he wrote, but it has been replaced by other modes; there have been social reforms,scientific advances, and so on. Gissing's first chapter is devoted to the times in which Dickens lived, and so is Chesterton's first chapter. Andrew Lang (1886, pp.14-15) notes that his own times are "almost destitute of humour," and wonders whether there is anything significant in the fact that in former times when there was a "broad-blown comic sense," there were also hangings, bull-baitings, cock-fights and so on. This kind of thinking seems to begin around the late 1880s,[38] when Dickens's time seemed far enough off, and it is in full swing around Chesterton's time of writing. Margaret Baillie-Saunders (1905, pp.28-29) sees the period from 1830 to 1850 as one in need of great social reforms which Dickens helped achieve, and to do so he had to pierce the dullness of his readers and cast sunshine into the gloom around him. Gissing's main point (p.14) is that the time was one of ugliness and misery, and Cross (1899, pp.180-81) spends some time showing what a shocking state the laws and constitution of the country were in. Chesterton, in his first chapter, takes quite a different approach, in deliberate opposition to Gissing. The gibbet, he says (p.13), stood up above the men of the time, but it stood up against the dawn and if

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[38] Although it is a development of the discussions of contemporary taste common in Dickens's time. See, for example, p. 230 above, for the Rambler's comment.

the period was full of evil things, it was full of hope. There is no need to go into Chesterton's theory here, but, to summarise, he sees Dickens's time as one in which the common man was encouraged to feel that he was important in society, that he was the equal of other men. He was also encouraged to be himself, and to express his individuality. Dickens's novels express these tendencies. Dickens allows his characters to be themselves - he does not shape them by art, but allows them to develop in ways that often ruin the plots. This naturally slides into Chesterton's theory that shapeless art is more life-like than carefully prepared realistic art that only gives the illusion of reality, which I have mentioned above, at the end of Chapter One.

There is, however, little that is new in Chesterton's argument for the personal causes of Dickens's work, and in his account of the growth of Dickens's art through his early years he is at one with his predecessors in the previous thirty years. The reason for the emphasis on Dickens's childhood and youth is not necessarily a remnant of any Wordsworthian "the child is the father of the man" idea, but again it seems to be caused by the critics' emphasis on the early novels. Apart from a few exceptions, most of them believe that Dickens's best work was in his first productions, and especially in his first novel, Pickwick Papers. Noting that he had no literary training, the critics seek the causes of his excellence elsewhere, and the most moving and most graphic as well as the most surprising portions of Forster's Life are those that describe Dickens's early years. His literary excellence is therefore said to lie in his natural powers of humour and high spirits which his early setbacks, if anything, increased.

Conclusion

It is not possible to do more than give an idea of the extent of criticism that is based on readings of Dickens's character and experience either through biography or through the novels. Nor, in a study directed primarily at the comedy of the novels, might it seem necessary to do more than give an idea of the extent of such criticism, if it was not that almost anything might be seen as relevant to the comic in some way. Lilly (1895), for example, calls Dickens "The Humorist as Democrat," which suggests two things: that Dickens aimed to promote social reform, and that Dickens was one of the people. The latter suggestion is taken up particularly by Chesterton (1906, p.133) who says that Dickens was irritated by the things that people were irritated by, and he did not merely champion the people, he was the people, when he protested against abuses. The usual run of the argument in this case is that because Dickens had suffered as a child, he had sympathy with the poor people, and sympathy is one of the characteristics of the humorist. Because the attributes of the humorist are so numerous, many of Dickens's experiences may be seen to have an ultimate bearing on his comic art. To a certain extent, his humour is an imaginative element, so the stimuli to his imagination - his father, James Lamert, his early reading, the odd corners of London - are all, finally, stimuli to his humour. This kind of criticism is particularly widespread and extremely complex in its ramifications in the generation after his death, mainly because of Forster's biography. But in the last period discussed in this chapter, there survive certain strands of criticism which had been apparent in earlier periods.

His comedy is felt to depend on his observation of life and his heightening of what he observes. Sometimes it is argued that he in fact saw in life what he describes, no matter how odd it may seem, but in general his comic art is said to be the result of the working of his

imaginative powers on the raw materials of life. Because to some he appears to caricature and to exaggerate more than is necessary, it is at times argued that his imagination is of a peculiar kind. He is possessed by it rather than in control of it. His art, as a result, is lacking in shape and balance. This kind of argument does not refer solely to the comic, but often it is suggested that his peculiar kind of comedy - caricature and exaggeration - depends on shapelessness and incongruity. Those who defend Dickens make few claims for him as an artist but say that his glory is his high spirits, the spontaneous overflow of exuberance. His comedy is a distinctly personal quality which makes his work highly original. If his opponents say he is an uncultured genius, his defenders admit that he is uncultured but stress that he is a genius. He may have had no knowledge of books and no literary training, but he knew a lot about life and men and he was able to recreate them in his novels. Such critics deny that Dickens did not know human nature in sufficient depth to be able to portray it accurately.

The adverse critics, of course, make the most of Dickens's lack of education and "absence of culture." They say that he is over-imaginative and lacking in intellectual fibre, and that this shows nowhere more clearly than in his satires. There he shows that he is ignorant of the facts and cannot reason. His imagination spoils his case. Moreover, he is an over-emotional writer. His earlier pathetic writings and his later attempts at pathos are ridiculed, and he is said to be fit for the amusement of his readers but for no more. The close link between humour and pathos in early decades does not last, but Dickens is always remembered as one who linked them closely together, and the softer emotions of his humour are both celebrated and ridiculed throughout the period. His heart-warming sympathy, kindliness, and geniality as a humorist and his benevolence, good feeling and lack of misanthropy as a satirist are always felt to be

typical of him, even if some critics find his philosophy of"cheerfulness" puerile and his satire lacking in strength.

What is common to most of the possible turns that such criticism may take is that a cause for the literary effect is almost invariably found in the personal nature or experience of the author. The "best" Dickens is the early Dickens whose youthful high spirits and love of fun were, it is said, expressed in his first works. When Dickens changes later in his career, he is sometimes said to be growing old and losing his spirits but not gaining any greater insight into human nature or social life. In the early novels, the low spots were explained away by Dickens's over-work and tiredness, in the later novels by his allegedly losing his grip. Because the novels are found to be humorous in places, Dickens is humorous, where they are felt to be sentimental, Dickens is sentimental, and those who claim that the novels are disordered claim similarly that Dickens's brain or imagination is in disorder. Novels are regarded as revelations of mind, personality and genius, and Dickens's characteristics are reconstructed from his writings.

THE STATURE OF THE COMIC WRITER

Introduction

This chapter is placed last because to an extent the others lead up to it. As has been evident in earlier discussions, Dickens's work is evaluated highly or lowly according to its degree of truthfulness and its effectiveness, and the personal qualities of the author are felt to cause either his literary excellence or his lack of it. Of course, further through his career, estimations of his standing as a literary artist affect assessments of his power to satisfy the important demands made of him, but in general there is a strong impulse towards evaluation of his stature. Earlier concerns reappear in this chapter, but I shall generally leave them to speak for themselves as I consider more or less direct attempts at assessments of stature.

There are basically three questions which concern critics on this point: whether Dickens is a great comic writer, whether he is a great novelist, and whether he is a great artist. Separable in theory, these questions are not wholly separable in the practice of the critics. Especially towards the end of his career, there is a feeling that he is a great comic writer - more particularly, a great humorist, although the word is used in a general sense - and that although this qualifies him for a respectable stature, it does not necessarily ensure his greatness as a novelist or as an artist. Such an assessment, which gains ground in the generation after his death, leads to an acceptance of his comedy, but not to greater understanding or analysis of it. His novels are condemned for their technical deficiencies of form, style and purpose, and their comedy is praised as the most important grace which keeps them alive. It is given high importance in his work but it is not necessarily an artistic element that will gain him respect as an artist. Comedy is

something Dickens had and expressed, and it betrays no evidence of the "culture" that a section of the critics seeks.

From the beginning, there are comparisons, often of the most perfunctory sort between Dickens and other great writers, mostly novelists. He is continually placed alongside, above or below the eighteenth-century novelists and his contemporaries, but such comparisons depend on the individual critic's attitude to the other authors he uses as standards. Fielding, Smollett and Sterne are not accepted unreservedly as great artists, and indeed novelists in general are not always accepted as such. Comparisons therefore appear between Dickens and those who were recognised as supreme artists, such as Virgil, Milton, and, most often, Shakespeare. All such relative assessments may work in Dickens's favour but they may equally be used to show how lowly in fact he is. But the mere use of high-flown comparisons, of course, indicates that Dickens is seen to be worthy of much respect. If he were the bad artist some critics claimed, they would not have needed to adduce Shakespeare's name to prove it, although some of those that do so are merely replying to the critics who had favourably compared his work with Shakespeare's.

The use of the names of past masters is an indication of the critics' desire to find in Dickens "permanent" qualities which will make his books favourable to posterity. Shakespeare, Fielding and others have "lived" because they portray universal humanity, and there is some doubt whether Dickens does so in his comic characters. Will future generations laugh, and will they see descriptions of mankind beneath what appear to be merely portraits of local oddities? Dickens is most often compared to comic novelists of the past and present, but it is clear that the critics who do so are not always comparing their comedy. As usual, they look for underlying sources of more lasting merit, and there is a wide variety of opinion on whether he possesses any. Very few are willing to allow that he is

a great novelist because of his comedy, although they do base their favourable opinions on qualities which are attributed to the comic novelist, such as love for mankind.

Again those who favour Dickens are ranged up against his opponents who give the impression of representing the cultured classes. Thackeray, also a comic novelist in some respects, is the favourite of the latter, and it is interesting that those who prefer him are willing to dismiss Dickens almost wholly, while those who acclaim Dickens are loath to decry Thackeray in return. This shows that there are elements in Thackeray's work which appeal to most critics, but Dickens was unfortunate in that some aspects of his work alienated certain kinds of critics. As far as the comedy goes, these aspects are the sentimentality that is associated with his humour and the various political stands he makes as a satirist. Dickens was too much a man in the public eye, too much "personally" present in his novels to be acclaimed "literary" by a number of critics. Again, this feeling begins late in his career and continues after his death.

There are many ways in which Dickens's stature is discussed or suggested, and I cannot hope to consider them all here. To have written the greatest comic novel of the century was no mean feat, but some critics insist on saying that he did not go beyond that, and they also claim that his comedy is not of the highest kind. Terms like "fun" or "farce" therefore indicate low stature, and it is with such indirect indications as well as with more direct assertions of Dickens's stature that I am concerned here. Few deny him a kind of "respectable" position in letters, but few are willing to place him very high on account of his comedy.

One of the most valuable emphases is on Dickens's imagination. Once it is realised that he is not to be expected faithfully to represent life and human nature, those who wish to defend him against the charge of

distortion begin to discuss his powers of heightening reality. On the highest level, he is an idealist, a term which includes an acknowledgement of his creative imagination. The best kind of creative artist, for a long time, is felt to be he who recreates reality but at the same time transcends it. This is felt also to be a poetic power, and there are a few comments, scattered through the period, about Dickens as a poet. Whether a comic writer can be a poetic novelist, and whether comic "poetry" is all that admirable is, however, not clear.

The Early Reaction: 1836 - 1842

In general, Dickens is rated high in this period. In spite of a tendency towards caricature noted by some critics, his work is felt to be on the whole truthful. The demand for truth is ubiquitous, and I shall say no more about it because the comments to be quoted in this section often make reference to it. The Mirror (16 April 1836, p.249) feels, of Sketches by Boz, that there is more amusement than instruction, but most early reviewers find positive value in his works. He promotes love of mankind and successfully - it is thought - attacks abuses. These attributes naturally raise him above the level of the ordinary writer, and they are partly thought to be admirable personal characteristics. Dickens knows a lot about the life he describes, he is not misanthropic, he teaches the right lessons, and he is, moreover, highly entertaining.[1]

Amidst this widespread enthusiasm, some reviewers note faults which do not prevent them from enjoying and admiring Dickens's work, but which they feel need to be improved upon before he can join the ranks of the truly great. According to Lister, in the Edinburgh Review (October 1838,

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1 See above, Chapter Two.

p.97), what he needs to do is to "supply whatever may be effected by care and study - avoid imitation of other writers - keep nature steadily before his eyes - and check all disposition to exaggerate." If he can do all this, Lister says, "we know no writer who seems likely to attain a higher success in that rich and useful department of fiction which is founded on faithful representations of human character, as exemplified in the aspects of English life." Some of the expectations of fiction-writers expressed here, and shared by many critics throughout the period under survey, are difficult for a comic writer such as Dickens to fulfil, and it is interesting to note that the kinds of things asked for in such quotations are similar to the qualities that late-century critics find lacking in Dickens. The Examiner (27 October 1839, Collins p.51) concludes its review of Nicholas Nickleby by saying, "In reserve for Mr. Dickens are still greater triumphs if he has patience and perseverance to prepare himself by study and self-restraint, by the pursuit of art and the pruning of common-place exuberance, for their full and satisfactory achievement. We hope that he will not fail in this. . . . We see in him, at no distant day, if he does entire justice to his powers, the not unworthy successor of our Goldsmiths and Fieldings," And the generally sensible London University Magazine (I, 1842, p.393) doubts Dickens's power to emulate Fielding in "perception of the springs of action," but adds, "much however may yet, and doubtless will be, done. Mr. Dickens is but a young man; and we must not forget that Fielding produced his first novel at a comparatively advanced age." In this higher artistic power Dickens is inferior to a recognised master, but at least the possibility of a comparison is entertained, and the reviewer does not give up hope. In this phrase about Fielding, the "perception of the springs of action," the reviewer refers to Hayward's article a few years earlier, in the Quarterly Review (October 1837, pp.484-85). He agrees with Hayward that Dickens has not the power of Fielding, but Hayward seems to have made up his mind that Dickens's level is definitely below the older novelists,

because he says that he also has none of Smollett's "dash, vivacity, wild spirit of adventure and rich poetic imagination" and his characters are not of the quality of Steele's and Addison's. Much is asked of the new writer by all of these critics, but others were not so demanding.

On moral grounds, Dickens is said, by the New York Star (1838[2]), to be superior to Smollett, Sterne, and Swift: he is not so coarse as Smollett, less effeminately sentimental than Sterne, and has not Swift's obscenity. As I showed in Chapter Two, Dickens's moral purity and instructiveness are seen to be literary merits, and here they help raise his stature. High praise comes also from the Morning Chronicle (7 June 1836, p.3) which says that Pickwick Papers is "full of the truth and humour of Fielding and Smollett," and from John Bull (11 September 1836, p.295) which says that "Smollett never did any thing better than the 16th chapter" of the same novel. The Literary Gazette is, like these, much less demanding, and gives Dickens indiscriminate praise (24 November 1838, Collins p.80): "At the end of a long career, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, our brightest lights in fiction, had done no more than he has achieved within this wonderfully short space." And the Examiner (4 December 1841, p.773) moves on in its period of confident championship of Dickens with Forster's assertion that Gabriel Varden will last longer than Parson Adams.

These comparisons, sometimes doubting, sometimes placing Dickens very high, at least place him above his contemporaries. As the Sunday Times (12 June 1836) says, the "style" of Pickwick Papers "is that of Fielding and Smollett, and we can truly affirm that no modern writer has approached so nearly to these great originals." Even without favourable comparison with the great eighteenth-century novelists, he is said by some to be superior to other writers of his time. Bell's Life in London (10 April 1836) praises his "power of describing the singular

[2] loc.cit., p.219.

and the ridiculous, in the human character" which is "not excelled by any writer of modern times;" and the Spectator(November 1838, Collins pp.42-43) places him specifically above Hook, Ainsworth and Bulwer, although this is not on the grounds of his comedy alone. Buller, in the London and Westminster Review (July 1837, Collins p.53) notes that a taste for depicting the "manners and humour" of the lower orders of London "has long been gaining ground in our higher literature," and claims that Dickens has done "on a larger scale and with far more striking effect, what many before him have laboured to do," while earlier the Globe (8 June 1836) simply says that Dickens stands "facile princeps" in this kind of description, and the Morning Advertiser (25 October 1836) says, "An author has not appeared amongst us for many a day so peculiarly gifted with that pénétration d'esprit which enables him in the ordinary affairs of life . . . to discover treasures of the richest humour, and of the deepest pathos." Even in Sketches by Boz,reviewed under the title of Watkins Tottle and other Sketches, Dickens's superiority is noticed by Poe, in the Southern Literary Messenger (June 1836, p.457), who says, on the eve of the journal's onslaught on Dickens's comedy, that he is "a far more pungent, more witty, and better disciplined writer of sly articles, than nine-tenths of the Magazine writers in Great Britain."

While from these comments it would appear that Dickens is consistently placed above his contemporaries, there are those who rate him on or near their level. The New Monthly Magazine (September 1836, p.103) in fact believes that Theodore Hook "excels him in rich humour and playful yet pointed satire," and the Spectator (20 February 1836, p.182) places him alongside Hook and Marryat but below Addison, Goldsmith and Washington Irving. However, in the London and Westminster Review (July 1837, Collins p.53), Buller says that Dickens is superior to Hook as a "writer of good comedy" is to one of "broad farce" and Lewes, in the National Magazine and

Monthly Critic (December 1837, Collins p.65) rightly protests against the comparison. Dickens has genius, but Hook only has "a certain talent of a certain sort" and has "never written any thing that will live." The comparison with Irving, he says, is more just, but Dickens now "transcends his model." The vote is not unanimous, but it appears to be strongly in favour of the superiority of Dickens to other writers of the early nineteenth century.

He is, moreover, highly popular, and his popularity is explained by Hayward, in the Quarterly Review (October 1837, p.484), as being due to his opening up "a fresh vein of humour" and his "new and decidedly original genius." Comparison with "preceding English writers of the comic order" shows, Hayward goes on to say, that, "in his own peculiar walk, Mr. Dickens is not simply the most distinguished, but the first." The Quarterly Review is much more demanding than many of the other journals at this stage of Dickens's career, and this statement must be paired with that quoted above, that Dickens has none of the high qualities of Fielding and others. "In his own peculiar walk," is the important part of the statement, because though Dickens may be a good comic writer, it is felt that there are far higher achievements for the "serious" artist. The fact of his popularity, too, always seems suspicious to educated reviewers who are often unwilling to admit that they like what the masses like. There needs to be some other proof of merit, and the feeling remains, that what is popular is "low." A similar kind of emphasis may be seen in the Monthly Review which, having objected to Dickens's exaggeration in a review (March 1836) of Sketches by Boz, First Series, says in a review of the Second Series and part of Pickwick Papers (February 1837, p.153), that perhaps the seeming defects are due to his humour, and that Dickens should rather be called an "originalist." The reviewer adds, however, "We are far from according to this distinction a very high station, as respects the amusement or the lasting benefit of mankind." Perhaps originality is not liked because it

does not allow the reviewer to judge Dickens by accepted standards - the eighteenth-century novelists, for example - or perhaps he uses the term "original" in its eighteenth-century sense, to mean that Dickens's work appears eccentric.

Others feel, too, that Dickens is good on a limited level of achievement. This is expressed by the Athenaeum (3 December 1836, Collins p.33) which, after the publication of the first nine Numbers of Pickwick Papers, says that the comic writer is good only as a relish but as no more of the literary diet. The reviewer adds that he does not wish to refine Boz - he does not wish to be "the weekly Hercules to his monthly Antaeus," because "if he were once lifted from the earth he would lose much of his strength:- he is not for the 'cloud-capp'd towers and gorgeous palaces,' for he could not be easy in them or near them." Comic literature is popular, even with the most high-brow reviewers, as a form of amusement, but generally they look for more than mere amusement and when they look for that they rarely look at comic literature. For this reason, Fraser's Magazine (April 1840, reprint[3] p.90) says of the characters, "All their sayings and doings[4] are fit material for the caricaturist - created for fun, and fun only," and the reviewer goes on to say that none of the characters has any gentleman-like accomplishment or feeling and even common sense appears to be out of the question. Harsh attacks on Dickens's "antics," "buffoonery," and "coarse humour" come from Tucker, in the Southern Literary Messenger (May and September 1837), and from the Literary and Pictorial Repository (July 1838, reprint[5] pp.269-70), which

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[3] F.G. Kitton, op.cit.

[4] This is an indirect comparison with Hook's Sayings and Doings (1826-29).

[5] Dickensian (Autumn 1939, pp.269-71).

places Dickens's comedy below that of Douglas Jerrold "who does not indulge in those vulgar trickeries and buffooneries which run through every page of Mr. Dickens's comic writings." As I have shown, especially in Chapter One above, such words as these imply low stature, but not consistently, because the less demanding John Bull (12 June 1836, p.190), for example, praises the "real fun" of Pickwick Papers. The range of comments during the early period depends to a large extent on what is expected of literature - papers like Bell's Life in London and the Sunday Herald are more likely to appreciate fun than the Quarterly Review and Fraser's Magazine, but the comment mentioned above from the latter, illustrates a class as much as a literary reaction.

However, the more demanding reviewers do seek more than amusement, and Dickens must have been encouraged by the support given to him by the influential, high-brow Edinburgh Review (October 1838, p.76) where Lister, though believing that the form and manner of the publication of his works does little to "inspire a belief of probable permanence of reputation," says that they are not "literary ephemerae," "mere specimens of the lightest kind of reading," "'good nonsense,' - and nothing more." Dickens is the "truest and most spirited delineator of English life, amongst the middle and lower classes, since the days of Smollett and Fielding," he is both original and deservingly popular, his work is truthful, appropriately effective and pure. Later, Lister concludes with the passage quoted earlier, that if Dickens takes care he may achieve even greater success than he has already. Despite the extravagant praise of some early critics, and despite the equally extravagant adverse criticism of some others, the position taken up by the Edinburgh Review fairly summarises the early period's assessment of Dickens's stature: he is an excellent comic writer, with the presence of something more than just comedy; with some faults that greater care and experience may improve; and he is at least worthy

of comparison with great writers of the past. That he is "spirited" in his delineations, and that he draws only middle and lower class characters, are two characteristics that in later decades carry more weight as criticisms, but in this period both are accepted without too much reserve because only the incautious claim a very high stature for the new author. Most reviewers recognise that it is too soon to judge, but the criteria by which Dickens is later to be judged are already visible. This is true also of his work as a satirist. Little is said of this in comparisons with other novelists, but his satire is judged by its aims and effects, and as I showed in Chapter Two, Dickens if felt on the whole to be successful.

The level that Dickens is to be seen on is indicated by some of the discussions mentioned in earlier chapters. Poe claims high idealism for Dickens, but not for his comic characters, and the Christian Examiner says that he is more tied to the actual and local than is necessary for an idealist.[6] Some reviewers expect grand passion and tragic force[7] in the novel before it can be rated very highly and the comic writer simply does not measure up to this standard. But his imagination is already praised by Poe and briefly by others, his head and his heart are acclaimed as being admirable,[8] and there is the promise of better things to come. For some, his comedy spoils the more serious aspects of his work, but there are moves afoot to reconcile comedy with the demands made of fiction. As a comic writer, he produces more than just "fun," and as a humorist and satirist, gains respectable stature because of this. But he is, nevertheless, a comic rather than a serious writer, in the eyes of most critics at this stage, and it is doubted that he is of the highest class.

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[6] See above, p. 54.

[7] See above, p. 134.

[8] See Chapter Three.

The Middle Years : 1843 - 1852

One of the harshest attacks on Dickens's stature in this period is made by Thomas Powell (1851). He notes (p.90) that most of Dickens's characters are drawn from the lower classes, and says that while this is acceptable, as it is in Much Ado About Nothing, as an agreeable relief from elevated portraits, when low life is all that is described, literature becomes "degraded to a far lower style," because it is not a "representation of life, but only of a particular phase of it." This kind of criticism comes mainly from adverse critics who attempt to draw a link between social class and literary class. Powell later (p.96) says that Dickens can sketch low life unerringly but fails with loftier and more complex natures, and is therefore "one of the most one-sided delineators of the human family that ever enjoyed a popular reputation." But in an age before universal education, it is perhaps to be expected that educated critics should assume that lower class people were simple and uninteresting, and throughout the period under survey Dickens is decried because he does not describe intelligent, educated, elevated characters. Already in this period, there are objections to his comic aristocrats,[9] and the trend in criticism that sees taste, learning, sense and nobility all as the preserves of the higher social classes - which excludes, they imply, Dickens and most of his characters, certainly all of his best creations - begins in this period, too. The Rambler (September 1849, p.333) claims that, because of the exaggerations in Dickens's works of late, his readers must now be of a lower class than they had been in the days of Pickwick Papers. Samuel Warren, in Blackwood's Magazine (November 1846, p.638), says that Dickens does not seem to care what the "upper and thinking classes of society" think of his novels, and in the same issue of the periodical, W.E. Aytoun (Collins p.208) complains that Dickens, though

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[9] See above, pp.68-69.

showing "sparkles of genuine humour," is limited by his lack of training, study, and care in writing. These objections of educated critics had begun, as I have shown,[10] with reviews of American Notes and continued through reviews of Pictures from Italy, and they do not abate at any stage throughout the rest of the period surveyed in this study.

Powell (pp.97-98) claims that Dickens exaggerates his characters rather than uses imagination to heighten them in an acceptable way. This, he says, ensures that he remains "in the second class of literature," and even in this class he is second to Fielding and Smollett. In the highest class are Shakespeare and other great poets whose imagination is put to proper use. The proper use of imagination is to recreate and transcend life, so that what is created is recognisably both true to life and yet a product of art. For Powell there is evidence of too much imagination and not enough understanding of the real, in Dickens's work, and his criticism is supported by the Court Journal (21 December 1850, p.809), which finds that Dickens is highly imaginative and poetical yet not sufficiently truthful.[11] Dickens's comic imagination is evident in his works, but reviewers generally expect it to be held in restraint. Even Masson, in the North British Review (May 1851), though he recognises in Dickens the "idealistic" method, is unwilling to allow him a high stature because he detects a certain lack of control which makes Dickens occasionally fall into the grotesque.[12] But Dickens has influential supporters in Whipple and Forster, on this question. The American Edwin Whipple, in the North American Review (October 1849, Collins p.238),

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[10] See above, pp.207-8, 210.

[11] See above, p.70.

[12] See above, p.65.

calls Dickens "a novelist and prose poet [who] is to be classed in the front rank of the noble company to which he belongs," and Forster, reviewing Martin Chuzzlewit in the Examiner (26 October 1844, p.675) finds that his work satisfies both "imagination and reflection" Clearly neither Forster nor Whipple places such high value on the mere copying of life and they are willing to find truthfulness in Dickens even though it may take a little effort to do so.

The question of truth often decides stature, however, and in this period there is some antagonistic criticism from those who are not satisfied with Dickens's character-drawing. For example, the Rambler (January 1848, p.64) says that Dickens is successful with lovable eccentrics like Captain Cuttle, but rises no higher because he can probe no deeper into human nature, and the same journal adds (September 1849, p.334) that there is only just enough humanity in Dickens's novels to save them from being improbable farces. Because he creates "peculiarities of character," he is popular, according to the Weekly Dispatch (6 May 1849, p.278), but the reviewer concludes that he is only a man of talent, not of genius, because his characterisation is lacking in depth. And Dickens needs to strengthen both his teaching and his truthfulness according to the Spectator in its review of David Copperfield.[13] After all of the praise given to Dickens as a humorist by the English Review (December 1848),[14] Dickens is counselled (p.272) to deepen his mind and soul by the cultivation of correct "moral and intellectual, religious and political" principles. Martin Chuzzlewit and parts of the Christmas Books have given the reviewer fear that if he does not do so, he may "retrograde." Despite the praise for humour, it seems that after all artistic excellence lies elsewhere, although the reviewer's description of

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13 See above, pp.67-68,140.

14 See above, pp.11,215-16.

humour is sufficiently wide to include a number of non-comic elements by which he may be judged, and the fact that he is a humorist rather than a wit, a political satirist or a mere punster, assures him a respectable status in the reviewer's eyes. Fraser's Magazine (December 1850, Collins p.245), having said in 1840 that Dickens had no more than mere fun,[15] returns to say of David Copperfield that his fun is "not mere fun" because of the "truths" that lie beneath it. Whipple, in the North American Review (October 1849, Collins p.240), defends him partly against the charge of caricature,[16] and bolsters his argument by saying that if Dickens's work is caricature of a kind, it is of a higher kind and Shakespeare, Cervantes, Hogarth and Scott all use the same method at times. He says, "Although it hardly approaches our ideal of fine characterisation, it has its justification in the almost universal practice of men whose genius for humorous delineation cannot be questioned." His works, Whipple adds, "rest on the deeper powers of imagination and humour."

Other defences against adverse criticisms are made elsewhere. Reviewing Martin Chuzzelwit, the Athenaeum (20 July 1844, p.665) says that, although it once thought of Dickens as a mere source of amusement, it now believes that there is, as Dickens claims in his Preface, evidence of higher art, of greater care, and of less attention to what the reviewer calls "coups de théâtre." Again, not merely referring to Dickens's comedy, the Dublin University Magazine (April 1844, p.520) hopes that Dickens will be able to continue to instruct as well as delight his readers. Thus, the writer says, may novelists lay claim to "a niche - more than a niche - a chapel, in the temple of Fame." What is most valuable for the reviewer is Dickens's moral teaching, and it is evident that much more than

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15 See above, p.270.

16 See above, p.62.

comedy is needed for fame, and even those who claim fame for Dickens as a humorist by-pass the comic to an extent because of the attributes of sympathy and love they give him. But nonetheless there is some respect for his comic art, and even in suggesting that there are deeper things in Dickens than the comic, such critics pay respect to it. No one claims great heights for him, but they rescue him from the level of ordinariness that the adverse critics place him on.

A similar respectability of stature is given him when he is compared, as in Whipple's criticism, with Shakespeare, Cervantes and others. The comparison with Shakespeare could work in one of two directions. Dickens may be seen to emulate a recognised excellence in Shakespeare, as he is when Masson, in the North British Review (May 1851, Collins p.249), compares his idealistic method with the dramatist's.[17] If Masson finds a similarity, he nevertheless places Dickens on a much lower level. But Shakespeare is also at times seen as the great flawed genius. Whipple, in fact, defends Dickens by reference to a flaw in Shakespeare, and he is careful to say that Shakespeare does not often use the method which looks like caricature. Fraser's Magazine (December 1850, Collins p.244), trying to account for Dickens's great popularity, says it is "not because he is faultless - he is too human for that; not because his plots are of absorbing interest - neither Shakespeare's nor Scott's are so." But Dickens's humour, kindliness and charity - separate but associable qualities - make him popular. The mere fact that he is mentioned in the same breath with Shakespeare suggests that at least a respectable stature is being claimed for him, and even if the comparison is used against him, as in Powell's criticism quoted earlier, this is still true, for otherwise it would be much like breaking a butterfly upon a wheel. Yet since Dickens offends some reviewers, and seems to others plainly to have done

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[17] See above, p. 66.

bad work in parts of all his novels in this period, and especially in his Christmas Books and non-fiction works, perhaps the comparison with Shakespeare was as yet a little daring. There is a feeling, however, in many of the comparisons with Shakespeare at this time and even in later periods, that reviewers are answering or throwing out challenges in making them.

More typical is comparison of Dickens with the illustrious novelists of the past. Powell places Dickens below Fielding and Smollett, and Warren, in Blackwood's Magazine (November 1846, p.636), condemns Dickens's tendency to caricature, in preference for Goldsmith's "delicate and exquisite limning" of human nature. But Bell's Life in London (6 May 1849, p.3) enthusiastically says, in a review of the first Number of David Copperfield, that if Dickens can keep this standard up, he will win fame "as lasting as that of a Goldsmith or a Sterne.[18] Reviewing the completed novel, Forster, in the Examiner (14 December 1850, p.798), praises the "broad and genial humour" alongside that of Fielding, Smollett, Sterne, Goldsmith and Addison, and the Atlas (9 November 1850, p.714) compares him with Smollett - for his dependence on comic character, and with Fielding - for his tone of "allusive satire," a term which is unexplained and unillustrated. This reviewer returns to Shakespeare as a comparison (p.715) because he feels that it is impossible to examine an author's merits without reference to the great dramatist. Dickens, despite his tendency to over-colour, shows a characteristic which is similar to Shakespeare's, the power to suit a character's speech to its personality so well that the reader can always tell who it is that is speaking even if the passage is taken out of context and headed with no name. Dickens's

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18 Sterne is not liked by everyone. The Dublin University Magazine (April 1844, p.520) feels Dickens is superior to him because Sterne is too "affected." In "sly yet innocent comicality," however, the two writers are said to be similar.

power of creating dramatic speech is not exactly placed on a level with Shakespeare's but the finding of a similarity suggests strongly that high stature is being awarded to him.

This suggestion is enhanced by the fact that the reviewer places Dickens above some of his contemporary novelists and a more recent predecessor, Scott. In the Peggotys, he feels, Dickens has outstripped Scott in the use of dialect speech, and he places him also above Bulwer and Thackeray (p.714) because Bulwer has too many affinities with the romance school, and Thackeray is bound too closely to the society he describes. Dickens, that is, is more likely to stand the test of time. With regard to Thackeray, however, there are the beginnings of the debate that surrounds their rivalry "for the prize of light literature," as Masson puts it, in the North British Review (May 1851, Collins p.249). As I have shown, Masson sees neither as being superior to the other, but discusses their different methods. However, the Court Journal, mentioned above, prefers the more realistic [19] Thackeray, and in this a reviewer in the Guardian (9 May 1849, p.304) agrees. Dickens's comic art seems neither sincere nor serious, to the reviewer, and he accuses him of "bookmaking." The North British Review (August 1851, pp.423-24) recognises merit in both as comic novelists, and if it slightly prefers Thackeray for his greater realism and intellectual content, it places both of them above the eighteenth-century novelists, who were ribald,[20] the reviewer says, and above lesser contemporaries, Hook and Marryat. R.H. Horne (1844, p.40) also rates Dickens higher than his (unnamed) rivals because, although some of them may have flashes of equal brilliance, none of them can "keep it up" for so long. Yet Horne feels that humour is not Dickens's highest characteristic, and he finds artistic excellence elsewhere. Thus, when

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[19] This term is not yet in use. I use it only for convenience.

[20] This is the main complaint against Fielding, Smollett, Swift, Sterne and others, but on the whole they provide a convenient standard of literary excellence, as it is conceived.

he says that Dickens's "best productions" will "live as long as our literature endures, and take rank with the works of Cervantes, of Hogarth, and De Foe," he does not mean simply in comedy that Dickens ranks so high, but by his choice of two of his comparisons at least, he clearly has comedy partly in mind.

To compare a novelist to a cheap dramatist in this period, when the stage was at a low ebb, and when the farces and melodramas catered for very undemanding audiences, is felt - by more demanding journals at least, although Dickens may have had mixed feelings about such comparisons - to be an insult. Samuel Warren, in Blackwood's Magazine (November 1846, p.636), feels that Dickens wants everything to "tell" as if from the stage, and the Family Herald (28 July 1849, p.204) warns Dickens that, if he must describe teachers, he should describe from Nature and not from the boards of the Adelphi Theatre.[21] The distaste felt or expressed by educated and fastidious reviewers for dramatic forms such as farce and melodrama must be understood to lie behind their application of such terms to Dickens's fictions. Farce is thought of as a kind of comedy, but it is associated with a very low kind of drama.

Such criticism comes, in the main, from Blackwood's Magazine, the Rambler and the Spectator. The Athenaeum, apart from its reference, quoted above, to "coups de théâtre," has changed its original attitude to Dickens, and, with the Examiner under Forster's influence, the Athenaeum consistently opposes the snobbish and unsympathetic assessments of journals that are already taking up their positions for the next period of Dickens's career. Forster, reviewing Martin Chuzzlewit in the Examiner (26 October 1844, p.677), says that the novel is "another of those sterling works which will not pass away with the perishable matter of the time." In largely solemn moral tones, Forster praises this and, in later reviews, the two succeeding novels,

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21 See above, p. 146.

but already there is something of a challenging note in his championship of Dickens. The biggest challenge is yet to come in Dickens's later career.

The Rambler (January 1848, p.65) says that Dickens is "unrivalled in his peculiar art." His "peculiar art" is his power to amuse readers by means of comic, exaggerated characters who are not true, either in all respects or in depth, to humanity. Forster, in proving that Dickens has the power to do more than amuse, that he is a "serious" artist, tends to over-stress the non-comic, and he has to re-stress Dickens's humour in his biography. But Forster is not alone in his over-stressing of the moral and the profound in Dickens's work seemingly at the expense of the comic. There is a widespread feeling that the comic writer's art needs to be dignified, and this generally means, at this stage of the period, that comedy has to be defended in the terms laid down by those who do not greatly admire the comic. A further method of defending Dickens is to compare him to the great writers of the past, but since there are no extended comparisons of method and achievement but only assertions of his quality, superiority or similarity, little progress is made, and largely, critics begin to set up positions for the next fifty years or so.

His stature as a satirist is rarely directly pronounced upon, partly because he does not yet offend in any major way, and partly because his satire is still in the main good natured and is felt to be an extension of his humour. That he is a truthful, effective and popular satirist is felt by the majority of critics, and assessments of his satire are made in the ways discussed in earlier chapters.

The Later Novels : 1853 - 1870

Not half way through this part of Dickens's career, Frank Walker, in the University Quarterly (January 1860, pp.94-95), notes that in criticisms of Dickens there is almost always a tone of "sharp controversy." One

school of critics is determined to disparage him because of his "maudlin sentimentality" and his defenders strike back strongly on his behalf. There is, Walker says, "little of the cool literary dissection, which dispassionately decides merit," and his rivalry with Thackeray causes much partizanship amongst critics.[22] Criticism of either writer "is less a literary disquisition than a public discussion." It is not didactic but polemic, and individual critics seem to be replying to objections against their favourite rather than attempting a comparison of the two authors. This is most relevant to the dispute over Dickens and Thackeray, but the critic's remarks have wider reference. Dickens is so often attacked during this period that his defenders are usually answering objections, sometimes in anticipation. The adverse criticism had begun before 1853 and this defensive - offensive tone is apparent earlier, but it becomes pronounced in reviews of the later works. I shall return to the dispute between the supporters of Dickens and Thackeray later, but first it must be pointed out that in this period some of the adverse critics feel that Dickens does not satisfy what they believe are "higher" demands of fiction. The most frequent complaints are that Dickens is unable to portray human nature with any depth or insight and that he fails to mirror life accurately. On the one hand he seems superficial, and on the other, even more superficial truthfulness is said to be lacking. Exaggeration is the main fault in both cases, and many agree with S.F. Williams, in the Rose, Shamrock and Thistle (IV, 1864, p.77), that its presence "makes the thing or person exaggerated so much below perfection as an artistic achievement." Exaggeration aside, the mere fact that comedy is involved casts doubt somehow on the artistic acceptability of

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22 See above, pp. 80,87 for Walker's defence of Dickens. Masson makes a similar point in his British Novelists. See Ford and Lane, The Dickens Critics, p.30.

the works. As Bagehot says in the National Review (October 1858, reprint p.218), "You take up the esteemed writers, Thucydides and the Saturday Review; after all, they do not make you laugh. It is not the function of really artistic productions to contribute to the mirth of human beings."[23] For the later reviewer in the same journal (July 1861, p.150), comedy may act as a "moral agent," but its position is not high because the lessons taught are not made clear or strong enough, but tend to be obscured by the reader's enjoyment of characters like Pecksniff. The "fun" of comedy is seen to prevent the novelist from being a "philosopher" in one of two senses: McCarthy in the Westminster Review (October 1864, p.432) says that he does not expect "theories" from a funny writer, and would not consider Dickens a philosopher did he not claim to be one, and James, in the Nation (21 December 1865, Collins p.473), feels the lack of "philosophy" in Dickens's characters. He suggests that comic writing is not "serious," because it does not deal with "humanity" but with oddities. This is put a little more kindly by George Eliot, in the Westminster Review (July 1856, p.55), who finds the humour of the characterisation a "corrective to his frequently false psychology." Whipple, in the Atlantic Monthly (May 1867, Collins p.486), defends Dickens against the charge of caricature once more, and suggests for him a respectable stature, but says that he is "not to be ranked with the greatest masters of characterization" because the subjects he chooses are not noble types, and because even among the comic characters there are no Falstaff's to be found. I shall return to this later[24] when comparisons with Shakespeare are discussed, but it should be noted that such opinions come dangerously close to confusing social with literary class. As in the previous period to this, Blackwood's Magazine does not always

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[23] Bagehot's statement speaks - as does that of George Eliot quoted below - of the importance of comedy in Dickens. See above, pp. 29-30.

[24] See below, p.291.

make the distinction. Mrs. Oliphant suggests, without saying, (April 1855, Collins pp.328-29) that Dickens's sphere, the ground where he is strongest and can outrun all his rivals, is society in its "third or fourth circle of elevation.[25]" When this confusion is avoided, it may be seen that Dickens's comedy is felt to keep him from the highest class of literary achievement and at the same time to preserve him from the lowest. But this is a generalisation to which there are a number of exceptions.

The critics' extra-literary biases are often clearly evident - although in James's case, one supposes, it is a literary objection. The strongest and most entertaining attacks on Dickens, which include personal, social, intellectual and, to some extent, an aesthetic bias, appear in the Saturday Review. Fitzjames Stephen, reviewing A Tale of Two Cities objects to the tricks of manner Dickens bestows upon his comic characters.[26] He says (17 December 1859, reprint pp.42-43) that Jerry Cruncher's hair, which sticks out like spikes, is not essential to his character but is merely one of Dickens's "grotesque" tricks. He adds that, if, instead of saying this, Dickens had said "his ears were like mutton-chops, or his nose like a Bologna sausage, the effect would have been much the same." Rigaud, in Little Dorrit is known by his nose and moustache, and Stephen says that since "there are many members in one body, Mr. Dickens may possibly live long enough to have a character for each of them, so that he may have one character identified by his eye-brows, another by his nostrils, and another by his toe-nails." This, Stephen concludes, is "the very lowest of low styles of art." Elsewhere - in the review of Great Expectations in the Saturday Review (20 July 1861, p.69) - Dickens is accused of relying too much on the exaggeration of a comic trait in a character, so that "the person who is the centre of

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[25] See above. pp.227-28.

[26] Ford and Lane, op,cit., pp.38-46. Page references are to this.

the extravagance becomes a mere peg or clothes-horse on which the rags of comedy hang loosely and flutter backwards and forwards[27]." The words used in such criticisms - trickery, extravagance, exaggeration, and so on - recur in the Saturday Review's articles of the period, and Dickens is called things like a buffoon (11 July 1857, p.35) and his comedy is described as banter (8 May 1858, reprint[28] p.165). The social, artistic and intellectual level on which Stephen places Dickens is perhaps best summed up in the analogy he draws between Dickens and a pastry cook (11 July 1857, p.35). Dickens is, according to Stephen, dissatisfied with his position as an amuser of the public, and he has turned social reformer instead. In this he is like a pastry cook who, dissatisfied with his successes with mere cream tarts, proceeds to "assert his native superiority to persons of a higher conventional rank by scarifying the Lord Chief Justice in gilt ginger bread caricatures, or handing down the Prime Minister to infamy in cleverly-devised shapes of blancmange." Stephen's arguments are prejudiced, but entertaining. And they clearly show both his attempts to relegate Dickens to low standing as an artist and his distaste for exaggerated art. Dickens's art is low because of his tendency to exaggerate character in order to amuse his readers, and, according to Richard Grant White, in the Galaxy (August 1870, p.258), his comedy is "low comedy" because of its dependence on tricks of speech to distinguish characters. White says, "Great . . . as Mr. Dickens's humor was, it was not of the highest quality" because "it did not rest sufficiently upon unmitigated human nature."

That it is the absence of truthfulness - philosophical, psychological or the truth of realism - that is most objected to is quite clear, and almost as important is the question of effect. Dickens is felt either not

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[27] A similar gibe appears in the Saturday Review (12 December 1863, p.759).

[28] loc.cit.

to teach any worthwhile lessons, or he is castigated for promulgating misleading doctrines. A typical method of lowering his stature is to refer to his work in terms of the low styles of other kinds of art. The Spectator (24 September 1853, p.924) calls his comedy farce, and reviewing Our Mutual Friend, it says (28 October 1865, p.1201) that Silas Wegg "is far less unforced and natural than the picture of Dick Swiveller, still it has the great carver's peculiar touch upon it, and will amuse as long as literary gurgoyles continue to attract the student of this kind of art." The review is a very harsh one, and the word "peculiar" and the phrase "this kind of art" carry the full force of the reviewer's distaste. Comic art of this kind is disliked also by the Rambler. Stothert, reviewing Bleak House, says (January 1854, Collins pp.294-95) that the theatrical element in the comedy is a limiting element: "He has no claims to be regarded as a writer of comedy; his characters are a congeries of oddities of phrase, manner, gesticulation, dress. . . . Admirably, indeed, he does his work. Never were there such farces off the stage before." And McCarthy, in the Westminster Review (October 1864, p.427) says of the use of mannerism and catchphrase, "On the stage the artifice is common and allowable; the novelist, however, has opportunities of developing character which are denied to the playwright. The impression left by this posture-making is, that the men and women we meet are acting their parts, and not acting them particularly well either. To represent Daniel Quilp eating hard-boiled eggs, shells and all, drinking boiling spirits . . . is mere burlesque." Bagehot, in the National Review (October 1858, reprint[29] pp.204-5), says that Dickens's humour consists in "treating as a moral agent a being who really is not a moral agent." He says, we read about "an acting thing, and we wonder at its scrapes, and

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[29] loc.cit.

we laugh at them as if they were those of the man," and he concludes that there is "something of this humour in every sort of farce." Such characters "belong to an altogether lower range of intellectual achievements, than the real depiction of actual living men." Bagehot plainly does not like comic caricature, and he says that the Shakespeare who created Falstaff is inferior to the creator of Lear, Hamlet and Ophelia. Dickens's caricature therefore "can never be for a moment compared with the great works of the real painters of essential human nature."

The word "fun" continues to hold depreciatory connotations. In Fraser's Magazine (July 1859, p.99), Hobart, preferring Thackeray to Dickens as a comic writer, claims that "the weapon which Mr. Dickens employs to excite risibility is little more than what is commonly called 'fun,' and implies none but the most superficial knowledge of the motives of human action." For Stott, in the Contemporary Review (February 1869, p.220), however, Dickens is inferior in humour to George Eliot, because his is "hardly ever anything more than burlesque and caricature." It depends too much on exaggeration, and is "somewhat coarse and superficial," while George Eliot's is at once "more profound and subtle." The reviewer adds that Dickens's rival's "perception of the greatness and littleness so strangely mingled in human life has, we think, been always a distinguishing feature in humourists of a higher order. . . . It is hardly necessary to say that of such nuances as these there is no trace of appreciation in Mr. Dickens, and the absence of them leaves his humour wanting in depth and delicacy of tone."

Another means of lowering Dickens's stature is to consider his work only as "light literature," as does the Saturday Review (11 July 1857). Novels in general are relegated to this class, and the term is not necessarily an insult to Dickens in all cases, but the tone in which the term is used sometimes implies hostility on the critic's part. However, some literary

modes are less liked than others, and in this period any approach to "sensationalism" is treated with suspicion by the more high-class journals, in a similar way to that in which Oliver Twist had once been linked to the Newgate novels.[30] These kinds of literature were extremely popular, but reviewers of a higher class tended to stand out against them. In this period, Great Expectations appears to be sensational and Mrs. Oliphant, in Blackwood's Magazine (May 1862, Collins p.439), protests, as does the British Quarterly Review (vol.35, 1862, p.157), which likens Dickens to the low-class novelists, the "Smiths and Reynoldses." Sala therefore does his friend little favour when he draws attention - as if it is a new idea - to the sensational elements in Dickens, in his article "On the 'Sensational' in Literature and Art," in Belgravia (February 1868, Collins pp.487 ff.) In such comments, however, the comic aspects of Dickens's work are not under attack.

Yet the most frequent and most controversial comparisons made during this period are between Dickens and Thackeray. Thackeray, the educated man, whose view of life appears to be more "serious" and who paints human nature more accurately, appeals more than Dickens does to the intellectuals writing for the Westminster Review and the National Review. The former journal (April 1853, reprint[31] pp.175-77) claims that Dickens merely amuses, appeals to the heart and not the intellect, and paints only the casualties of character, not the essence; and the National Review (January 1856, reprint[32] pp.270-71) prefers Thackeray's truthfulness. Putnam's Monthly Magazine indicates two possibilities when it first (November 1853, p.559) places Thackeray above Dickens as a "literary artist," then (March

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30 See above, p. 128.

31 Tillotson and Hawes, Thackeray: the Critical Heritage (1968).

32 ibid.

1855, p.268) reverses its verdict because Dickens is less cynical, more kindly as a satirist. Yet Fraser's Magazine (July 1859, p.99) finds Thackeray's humour "far finer and more subtle," and his satire more harsh and more effective, than Dickens's. Walker, in the University Quarterly (January 1860, pp.97-98), vigorously defends Dickens's greater imaginative powers. Mere realism is not necessarily more truthful than Dickens's idealisation of fact, he claims. The debate is long and inconclusive, and there are too few like Masson, in his British Novelists and their Styles (1859), who take no sides but see merits in both authors. The British Quarterly Review (October 1859, p.462), reviewing Masson's book, feels that "on the whole," Masson prefers Dickens, and the reviewer is surprised that this is so, since Masson is a scholar, and since Dickens shows no signs of scholarship, even in his historical novel, Barnaby Rudge. As a moral teacher and describer of mankind, Thackeray is in every way superior to Dickens, according to the reviewer. Dickens's reputation could only suffer in such a debate, because although the "intellectual" critics are only too willing to scorn him in favour of Thackeray, his defenders are seldom willing to scorn Thackeray in his favour, because of Thackeray's solid accomplishments which satisfy most of the critics' demands of fiction. Thackeray's offences against mankind, in the form of cynicism, are less often complained about after Vanity Fair, and in general those who support him are the ones who place most value on the intellect and on realism. Reviewers feel that there is much more thought in his work than in Dickens's, and that Thackeray's greater education shines through his work. As a satirist, Dickens's stature is decided in accordance with its supposed truthfulness and effectiveness. This may be seen in the critical statements quoted here, but it is needless to repeat that those who object to the truthfulness of the satires in this period see Dickens as a poor satirist and those who fear for the effects of his social teaching are apt to damn him similarly. But the considerations of truth -

fulness and effectiveness predominate in discussions of the satires as may be seen in above chapters.

Those who wish to save Dickens's reputation make use of the comparison of his powers with those of Shakespeare and other great literary names from the past. Forster, in the Examiner (8 October 1953, Collins p.290), compares Dickens with Virgil and Milton, saying that such comparisons "are not impertinent" because Dickens writes novels that "rise to the dignity of poems" in the spirit in which Fielding composed Tom Jones as an epic. Reviewing Little Dorrit a few years later, in the Examiner (13 June 1857, p.372), Forster makes a similar high comparison, this time placing Dickens's method of characterisation against that of Spenser in the Faerie Queene. Such daring proposals are an attempt to forestall low assessments of Dickens's stature by placing him with the very highest, but the usual standard for such a critical tactic is Shakespeare. The references to Shakespeare are almost always inexact because the range of Shakespeare is very wide, and while some reviewers intend to compare Dickens's versatility with Shakespeare's, the usual reason for comparison is the supposed similarity of their characterisation. No critics seriously believe that Dickens really approaches Shakespeare's standard, but, on one level, he creates the same kinds of characters in similar profusion. This opinion is summarised by Putnam's Monthly Magazine (November 1853, p.558), where Riggs says, "As a delineator of persons, and the creator of distinct types of humanity, he stands second only to Shakspeare; while, in fertility of invention, he is fully the equal of the great poet of humanity. If he has given us none of the grander forms of human passion, none of the Othellos, Hamlets and Lady Macbeths, he has created a vastly greater multitude of the baser order than the great dramatist." Another American, Whipple, in the Atlantic Monthly (May 1867, Collins p.486), praises Dickens highly, but nevertheless

says that he is "not to be ranked with the greatest masters of characterization," not because of his caricature, but because he chooses not to paint noble characters. His materials are "the common stuff of humanity," heightened and lovable perhaps, but lacking in "the element of thought," as Whipple illustrates by comparing Falstaff to Captain Cuttle. Falstaff as a companion would be always interesting and stimulating, but Captain Cuttle, despite his kindness of heart, would be "a bore."

But some reviewers are less cautious and more inclined to be led by their emotions than Riggs and Whipple. Talbot, in Putnam's Monthly Magazine (March 1855, p.265), claims that Dickens "has told over again the story of human life, substantially the same in all ages; he has laid bare the springs of human character and given utterance to the manifold deep sorrows that accumulate in human experience. What has Shakespeare done more than this?" During the discussion that follows this statement, Talbot claims that Dickens is the equal, at times the superior, of Shakespeare in low-life delineation, in fitting the characters' speech to the characters, and in the sheer fecundity of his creation. In The Train (August 1857, p.79), John Hollingshead praises mainly the pathos of Little Nell, in his final paragraph, and he concludes that Dickens is "Truly a fit companion for that low player of the olden time, who wrote King Lear and acted at the Globe." Whether this is said about Dickens's stature as a writer or a man is, however, unclear. Charles Cleveland (1867, p.720), though aware that the time "has not yet come for an impartial estimation of the writings and genius of Dickens," says that it is "generally conceded" that he stands "at the head of all writers of fiction," and has been "not inaptly called 'the prose Shakespeare of the nineteenth century'." Cleveland's mixture of caution with enthusiasm sometimes disappears in highly eulogistic obituaries, as for example in the Athenaeum (18 June 1870, p.804), where Chorley calls Dickens "one of the greatest and most beneficent men of genius England has produced since the

days of Shakespeare." Trollope, in St. Paul's Magazine (July 1870, p.372), pays his rival a handsome tribute when he says that "no other writer of the English language except Shakespeare has left so many types of characters as Dickens has done," and Alfred Austin, in the Temple Bar Magazine (July 1870, p.562), claims that Dickens is "as far above all other English novelists, as Shakespeare is above all other English dramatists." But Austin is, however, cautious, for he says earlier (p.559) that Dickens is "unspeakably below" the great dramatist. It needs to be repeated that no critics really place Dickens on Shakespeare's level, but some aspects of his work compare favourably with Shakespeare's, and the comparison offers a means of showing how high Dickens is rated compared to his contemporary rivals. Even if, as Austin says (p.562), both Dickens and Shakespeare share the same faults, this proves that even the greatest writers are not perfect and that Dickens's faults should be treated leniently. Similarly, the Leader (4 July 1857, p.640) points out that Dickens's lack of higher education should not be held against him, because Shakespeare had none.

But the reference to Shakespeare could work against Dickens. Unfavourable critics point out that Dickens does not at all share some qualities which make for greatness. The United States Magazine (September 1853, p.280), for example, says "Homer and Shakespeare will always be read, because valor and heroism and grand storms of passion will always necessarily interest human nature. But Bulwer and Dickens will pass away with the manners they describe." Hobart, in Fraser's Magazine (July 1859, p.98) also places him below Shakespeare. He proves his point by comparing Falstaff and Mr. Pickwick. We laugh, he says, at Falstaff's "moral weaknesses and follies," but in Pickwick we only laugh at externals. "In Pickwick it is the tights and gaiters; in Falstaff it is the man. For Dickens has humour only, Shakspeare had both humour and wit; Shakspeare

had creative genius, Dickens has only an extraordinarily-developed mimetic faculty." The sense in which "wit" is used here appears to be that of general intelligence or intellectuality. Fitzjames Stephen, however, in the Saturday Review (8 May 1858, reprint[33] p.168), colourfully attacks Dickens's wit - as a comic power - as being inferior to Shakespeare's. The wit of Henry IV or The Merry Wives of Windsor, he says, is like "spangles on rich velvet," but the wit of Pickwick Papers is like "spangles on tinsel paper." The like-minded - rationalist and anti-Dickensian - Westminster Review (April 1866[34]) also says that he comes far short of "the highest rank of highest genius." That is, he does not compare with Aristophanes, Molière, Swift, Cervantes and Shakespeare, according to the reviewer, who says (Collins p.474[35]), "the more we study Falstaff, Gulliver, and Sancho Panza, the more we perceive the art of the artist and thinker, but the closer we look at Mr. Dickens's characters, the more we detect the trickery of an artificer." The lack of truthfulness of characterisation again perturbs the reviewer, and his criticism has more than a touch of the personal to it, but since reference is made by other critics to a number of other illustrious literary names from the past, I shall go on to consider such references.

There is still a feeling that Dickens is better than some of the eighteenth-century novelists because his work is morally purer.[36] As late as 1870, Sala (pp.23-24) says Dickens is funnier than the "deplorable" comic writers of the decade just before him, more comprehensible

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[33] loc.cit.

[34] Quoted by J.B. Castieau, "Dickens and his Critics," Dickensian (January 1919, p.33).

[35] Not having access to this review, I have used two sources.

[36] For similar comment, see above, p. 267.

than Fielding and morally purer than Smollett and Sterne, whose comedy, "when it was funny", was "usually ribald." Usually, however, the early novelists make a good comparison for Dickens. As H. Dennison, in the National Quarterly Review (June 1860, p.93) says, Dickens may not be on the same level as Homer, Milton or Shakespeare, but he does rank with the "much humbler" Fielding, Richardson, Goldsmith, Sterne and Smollett. That the novelists are considered to be humbler is a remnant of the earlier suspicion of the novel, and even though by mid-century the novel has become a respectable literary genre, Talbot in Putnam's Monthly Magazine (March 1855, p.265), feels the need to justify the title of novelist for Dickens by stating that "men of the highest order of intellect, such as Cervantes, Goethe, Richter and Walter Scott, have given highest dignity to that class of writers." The implication is that Dickens fits well into such noble company, but as the Westminster Review's statement above shows, the more "high-brow" journals use the same kind of list to prove the comic writer's unfitness for such comparison. The detractors of Dickens say that the comic element is too strong in his work, whereas the great writers of the past are more truthful to human nature and more intellectual than he.

As a literary artist in general, Dickens may or may not measure up to the highest, although the point about comparisons like Forster's quoted above[37] is that he does stand alongside great poets. Those who compare him favourably with Shakespeare are often claiming some kind of "poetic" status for him and this raises him above the ordinary kind of novelist because "poetry" is felt to be higher than mere "prose." Dickens's imagination raises him higher than the mere copiers of life, but as I have shown, those who demand greater intellectual control in fiction either do not like imagination itself, or they do not like Dickens's

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[37] p.290.

imagination because it seems to lack control. Often the objections - and the defences - are not concerned specifically with his comic imagination, but at times this is, indeed their fault. Not enough stock is taken of the comic, and Dickens's imagination is simply said to be inferior.

As a "mere" comic writer, Dickens may measure up to the comedy of the highest. Edward Roscoe, in the Victoria Magazine (August 1870, pp.357,360), claims that he is comparable, in humour, with Shakespeare and Scott, while S.F. Williams, in the Rose, Shamrock and Thistle (IV, 1864, p.74) says of his humour that "It is as delicate as Scott's, as broad and farcical and happy as Smollett's. . . . As in the case of Sterne, it is blended with a pathos which can move the heart to tears." Here we are told something about the nature and range of Dickens's humour, but the suggestion is also that he is on the same level of achievement as the novelists mentioned. Riggs, in Putnam's Monthly Magazine (November 1853, p.558) indeed, on the score of fecundity of character-creation, places Dickens above all of the novelists from the time of Fielding put together, but the Christian Spectator (December 1865, p.721) feels that Dickens is inferior to Defoe, Fielding and Thackeray because of his lack of truthfulness. The fact is, the reviewer says, in reading Dickens "we do not care to enquire whether it is actually true, because we feel it is amusing." The "farcical" element in Dickens is uncensured, but it automatically places him on a low level of achievement. Thus it may be seen that the comparison with earlier novelists does not necessarily mean that high stature is being claimed for him. And sometimes it depends on the critic's attitude to the earlier novelist mentioned whether Dickens is praised or blamed. The Ecclesiastic and Theologian (October 1855, p.469) calls Dickens's novels "a mine of whim and fancy," and says that few besides Tristram Shandy may be "placed on a level with them," but Sargent, in the North American Review (October 1853, p.420) dislikes

Sterne although he dislikes Dickens more, for he says that, in comparison, Dickens's novels "possess even greater eccentricity and exaggeration" and have an even more prolix style. Sterne is not liked by other critics because of his immorality and, later in the period, his sentimentality.

If Dickens does not compare with the great novelists of the past, he is still sometimes said, condescendingly, to be good in his way. In creating "oddities," he is excellent, according to Stott, in the Contemporary Review (February 1869, p.212). But the resultant stature is not high, for Stott adds (p.213), "What he aimed at doing here, he has done perfectly; and to have attained perfection in any line, though it may not be a very high one, is not an achievement which criticism can consent to estimate lightly." As a humorist he is, as Stott reiterates (p.220), "in his own line excellent," but "this line does not seem to us a very high one," because his humour is "hardly ever anything more than burlesque and caricature" and depends on "somewhat coarse and superficial" exaggeration. The emphasis here is the same as that which may be seen in the comments of those who place Dickens below Shakespeare but on the same level as Fielding and Cervantes. The level he has reached is respectable, but it is not the highest, and Stott (pp.220-21) places George Eliot's subtler and more intellectual humour on a higher level. Even Sala (1870, p.99) cannot escape such a conclusion, even though he is no high-brow and wishes to do all he can for his friend's reputation. On the topmost rung stands Shakespeare with Milton, Dante and Homer, but Dickens marches in great company nonetheless - with Jonson, Dryden, Molière, Cervantes, Scott and Thackeray, and his reputation will be world-wide.

Dickens's career ends with very high praise for his humour from both undemanding enthusiasts such as Sala and from the intellectual Hutton, in the Spectator, a journal which had, in the 1850s and 1860s, taken a high

intellectual - and class-prejudiced - line with Dickens's work. In the Spectator (17 April 1869, p.474), Hutton boldly says, "We doubt if there were ever so great a humourist in the world before, Aristophanes and Shakespeare not excepted." He repeats this praise in 11 June 1870, and defends it against the objection of J. Hain Friswell[38] the following week. Friswell says that not only does Dickens have no characters to compare with the breadth and depth of characterisation of Falstaff, but he has none even to compare with Shakespeare's lesser characters such as Nym, Pistol, Maria, Sir Toby Belch, and the Fools in King Lear and Twelfth Night. He has not even equalled Partridge, Parson Adams, Uncle Toby, Corporal Trim and Sancho Panza. Again, the earlier novelists are seen to be of the second rank, and Dickens, mainly because of a lack of knowledge of human nature and depth of character analysis, is seen to be inferior even to them. Hutton agrees with Friswell that Dickens's characters are not real, but, taking one of Friswell's examples, he says that Mrs. Gamp, "as a feat of humour," is superior to anything in Shakespeare.[39] It is not necessary that the humorist should paint truthfully and show depth of knowledge of human nature, and he is far below the greatest painters of humanity because of his deficiencies in these areas, but as a humorist he is nevertheless the greatest ever, in Hutton's opinion. He returns to the question, in the Spectator (25 June 1870, p.776), and says "in any sense in which we can call Shakespeare one of the greatest of humourists, or Molière a great humorist, or Jane Austen, or Thackeray a great humourist, the genius of Dickens displayed a humour richer and higher than the highest kind attained by any of these, though some of them were, of course, as far above Dickens in general intellectual strength as Dickens was above

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[38] See above, p.93.

[39] St. James's Magazine (August 1870, p.698) follows Hutton's lead, and reiterates this.

Horace Smith or Miss Burney." Hutton puts his argument sensibly and kindly, but the limited powers evidenced by the humorist had been noted before with less enthusiasm. Stothert, in the Roman Catholic Rambler (January 1854, Collins p.297) says,at the end of his review of Bleak House, that Dickens, though an "unrivalled humorist" and "eminently respectable in his morals," evidences a knowledge of human nature which is "as superficial as it is extensive." Dickens's observation of mankind is praised, but the more intellectually-biased reviewers find that he knows a little about many aspects of life and humanity, yet betrays no depth of perception. Later, reviewing Great Expectations, the Rambler (January 1862, Collins p.438), having discussed mainly his faults, says that despite them "we should be puzzled to name [his] equal in the perception of the purely farcical,ludicrous, and preposterously funny." The words used themselves limit Dickens's achievement, as does the statement that his work is sufficient to excite "a pleasant quiet laugh on a dull winter-day," even if the attractive high spirits and laughter of Pickwick Papers are no more.

As I mentioned above,[40] there are those who, in reviewing the later novels, take refuge from the charge of the absence of bright comedy in them, by saying that Dickens has matured both as man and as artist. Dallas, indeed, says, in his review of Great Expectations in The Times (17 October 1861, p.6),that Dickens has managed to give his readers the fun of the earlier novel without sacrificing the gains he has made as an artist in recent years. Dallas, of course, finds much more than mere fun in Dickens, and he chastens both those who find no more than fun and those who expect no more, but when he asks "Who is going to find fault when the very essence of the fun is to commit faults?" he appears to be doing no

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[40] See p.152.

more than fend off Dickens's depreciatory critics. There is an obvious difference between his criticism, however, and that of the Dublin University Magazine (December 1861, Collins p.436), which finds many faults in Dickens's work, but is still willing to see him as "the oldest, yet still the first of our living humorists." Even the Saturday Review (11 November 1865, Collins pp.461-62) admits that Dickens "in humour, in inexhaustible fertility of fancy, in quickness of eye for detecting the right points, when he is at his best, stands altogether unrivalled." The powers described are not high, and as usual the Saturday Review dwells long and hard on his faults, but on a limited level of achievement, Dickens has at times reached a very high standard. Even the usually generous Examiner (20 July 1861, p.452), amidst high praise for Great Expectations, seems to choose its words carefully when an attempt is made to assess Dickens's stature. In earlier reviews, of Bleak House and Little Dorrit, Forster had given high praise to Dickens and placed him in the company of Spenser and Milton.[41] The reviewer of Great Expectations,[42] however, merely says that Dickens is "the greatest master of the whimsical and the pathetic yet to be found in any age among the prose writers of Europe." The word "whimsical" does not suggest a very high level of achievement, and the reviewer looks as if he is being careful to say "prose-writers" because he does not believe that Dickens ranks with the poets. The review praises Dickens highly, with the Examiner's usual enthusiasm, but nevertheless it works from a basis which subtly limits Dickens's achievement: he is a prose writer and not a poet, and if he is equal to the greatest prose-writers, it is only in a special way. Reviewers often state clearly, or as in this case, subtly suggest that, though Dickens's work is not negligible,

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[41] See above, p.290.

[42] Possibly Forster, although he left the Examiner in 1855. Brice, loc.cit., suggests that the reviewer may be Henry Morley.

it is nevertheless not of the very highest quality.

An important question for many critics was how long Dickens's works would last after their immediate appeal to the masses had passed away. Would literature which was not true to the depths of human nature, which described passing social types in a way that make it possible only for contemporaries to understand it, last through the future generations? Those who find "permanent qualities" in Dickens's works are not troubled by this question, but his adverse critics need to answer it. Sargent, in the North American Review (October 1853, p.420), claims that no one reads Sterne in the middle of the nineteenth century, and "in after times" no one will read Dickens, who is said to be too intent on playing the buffoon to care much for his future fame. Future generations will not understand his humour which, according to White, in Galaxy (August 1870, p.258), is more "of an age" than "for all time." In this, White says, Dickens is inferior to Shakespeare, Scott and Molière. According to Stephen, in the Saturday Review (8 May 1858, reprint[43] pp.167-68) the same fate will befall Dickens as, he claims, has befallen Pope: "Fifty years hence, most of his wit will be harder to understand than the allusions in the Dunciad; and our grand-children will wonder what their ancestors could have meant by putting Mr. Dickens at the head of the novelists of his day." Stephen's judgment is that it is not certain "that his books will live, nor . . . that his place in literary history will be by the side of such men as Defoe and Fielding." The Westminster Review (January 1862, p.288), in its dissatisfaction with Great Expectations, foresees an even swifter demise than Stephen does, for it says that "twenty years hence" no one will find enjoyment in the novel. It adds, two years later (October 1864, p.441), that Dickens will not live as a classic. Not all of these comments refer solely or even mainly to Dickens's comedy, but in those that do not,

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[43] loc.cit.

it is recognised as an important element in his appeal, which, the critics have decided, is local and temporary in its nature.

Already there are signs that demands are being made of the novel which George Eliot and Thackeray answered more readily than Dickens. These demands, for greater realism, for more intellectual appeal, for evidence of learning, become more acute in the generation after Dickens's death. Most critics during Dickens's career are willing to leave it to "posterity" to decide on his merits, assuming that if Dickens continues to be read or fails to be read any longer, the question will be decided, but failing this, they feel that posterity may be better equipped to judge.

The Generation After Dickens : 1871 - 1906

G.H. Ford[44] says that the reputation of Dickens, during the period 1848-1872, was beginning to be undermined by a minority of critics who had outgrown his books or who desired another kind of fiction than that which he offered. They were, Ford says, "willing to leave the small principality of humour" as his sole domain, but they insisted that his hands were "quite unworthy" for "the other responsibilities of his kingdom." After 1872, according to Ford, this minority opinion becomes "increasingly important and prevalent." It may be seen from the previous section that while it is correct that humour is seen as Dickens's strong point it by no means secures him a high stature as a writer. He is "good in his way," many say, and even though he is often felt to be an unrivalled humorist, there are much higher forms of art in the eyes of critics in the generation after his death. Many factors contribute to Dickens's decline in popularity with a section of the critics: they desire change, they emphasise

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[44] op.cit., pp.154-55.

the intellect, they feel that Dickens is no longer relevant to the times they live in, they prefer more modern artistic modes, and so on. If Dickens is not liked for some reason or other,[45] then it is quite natural that his most prominent characteristic should be especially attacked. In fact, however, despite some peevish attacks, which there had always been, his comedy is liked by many critics in the generation, and although they may not value it highly as an artistic quality most critics make some reference to its excellence. The continued tendency to see Dickens as primarily a humorist is abetted by the influence of Forster's Life and by the continuation by R.H. Hutton of the stance he adopts in his 1870 articles. The numerous literary historians, who at times rely on critical clichés to fill out their chapters and sections on Dickens, draw on such conventions and help perpetuate them.

Forster's emphasis on humour may be taken as a starting point. In his Life (II p.272 ff), he conducts a notorious dispute with Taine and Lewes who do not pay sufficient attention to it, and Forster goes to great lengths to show that humour is superior to "fun" because of its greater imaginativeness, truthfulness and right effectiveness.[46] "Fun"is used to indicate low comic stature by Mrs. Oliphant in Blackwood's Magazine (June 1871, pp.691-92), who says also that Dickens "drew but sparingly" from the "higher fount of humour." More than twenty years later, Saintsbury (1895, p.128) says that the only quality in Dickens that is not spoiled by being alloyed with a baser element is his "fun" - a dual insult, since it is said to be the only element, and even it is not a high one. Leslie Stephen (1888, pp.927,931) suggests, through the use of the

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[45] Saintsbury (1895, pp.117-19) offers a contemporary account of the causes of Dickens's unpopularity. Ford, op.cit.,p.229 says Lewes's article in the Fortnightly Review (February 1872) is typical.

[46] See above, p. 179.

same term, that Dickens is enjoyable for simple effects, but as soon as he attempts to become a moralist or reformer his fun stands out as his most worthwhile quality. When other comic modes are noted as well, the attribution of fun is no insult, but when fun is said to be the summit of Dickens's achievement, Forster's anger is understandable. The same goes, on the whole, for "farce." Mrs. Oliphant, in her later The Victorian Age of English Literature (1892, p.265), says that Dickens does not create high comedy, but at least he does not sink to the level of farce. Dawson (1905, pp.112) questions whether Dickens would not better be described as "a great master of farce" rather than as a humorist. Farce, he explains (p.115), always borders on vulgarity, and he blames Dickens's contemporary critics for not truly criticising his works. If they had, he says (p.117), Dickens might have learned to write better. Lilly (1895, p.14) calls Pickwick Papers "a farce, but a farce of a very high order," but it is also, in his opinion, Dickens's "masterpiece." Gissing (1902, p.202) admits that there is farce in Dickens, and he draws a distinction between it and humour. Farce aims only to amuse, but humour "always suggests a thought, always throws light on human nature." Chesterton (1906, p.144) defiantly calls Dickens's early and best works "farces" because the term stresses Dickens's irresponsible comic exaggeration and therefore supports Chesterton's thesis that the "impossible" Dickens is the greatest because in this mood he is most creative and, paradoxically, most realistic.[47] Both Chesterton and Gissing defend Dickens against the adverse connotations attaching to the words "caricature" and "exaggeration," which are still potent attacking forces in the early twentieth century. Chesterton's defence is the same as his tactic used with respect to "farce," but Gissing (pp.153-54) more soberly disagrees

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[47] See above, pp.116ff. I shall return to Chesterton later in this section.

with those who think that to call Dickens a caricaturist and to praise his humour "is to dismiss him once for all." Although Dickens occasionally invites the charge, he is, Gissing maintains, an idealist as much as Shakespeare is. But the charge is made strongly in some quarters, and even critics who are disposed to be favourable to Dickens are embarrassed by the element in his works. The London Quarterly Review (January 1871), which is far from being favourably disposed, makes repeated reference to Dickens's buffoonery, grotesquerie and weirdness, and the charge of caricature is made with some hostility. Aware that Dickens had been excused as an idealist, the critic says (pp.275-76) that his caricatures merely lead to low comedy and fail to become idealizations. The insults directed at Dickens are numerous, and as is clear from discussions of the review above, his work is placed on a very low level indeed. Subsequent charges of caricature are not often so vigorous, but Harrison, in Forum (January 1895, p.547), who does not wish to decry Dickens, has to admit that the presence of caricature disqualifies him from being "a humourist of the highest order," and Lord, in the Nineteenth Century (November 1903, p.769), though concluding that "most of his work is better than caricature," is nevertheless discomforted by its presence. Ward (1882, p.219) dislikes the grotesque, and though he admits that Dickens is a great humorist, he is uneasy about the tendency towards the inferior mode.

No one claims that Dickens is faultless, of course. Even Forster (Life, II p.273) admits to an occasional excess of exaggeration "beyond the allowable," and Chesterton speaks (1906, p.216) of his bad work, and earlier (p.24) says that there is "plenty to carp at in this man if you are inclined to carp." Forster would say that the faults are negligible, but Chesterton and others would say, in varying ways, that the faults are considerable and need to be ignored in order to concentrate on the excellences. Harrison, in Forum (p.553), having spoken of many of Dickens's faults,

concludes his article by saying, "The young and uncritical make too much of Charles Dickens, when they fail to distinguish between his best and his worst. Their fastidious seniors make too little of him, when they note his many short-comings and fail to see that in certain elements of humour he has no equal and no rival. If we mean Charles Dickens to live we must fix our eye on these supreme gifts alone." Dickens is not a great humorist, but on a limited level he is excellent. Even Lord, in the Nineteenth Century (p.765), has to admit that Dickens must be "greater than most" because his adherents allow that he has many faults yet still find value in him. Lord does not entirely enter into what he calls a world-wide "freemasonry of mirth" among Dickensians, but he is clearly puzzled that so much can be denied to Dickens by severe critics yet so many people still find value in his work. He concludes his long article (p.781) with a tribute to Dickens's cheerfulness. Though he "bores us worse than the daily newspaper," Lord says, he also "cheers us beyond any other writer that ever lived." Chesterton, at the end of the period, does not defend Dickens against the severe critics. He admits the artistic faults of the novels, but finds more than mere cheerfulness and a limited level of humour. Since he takes the praise of the comic further than anyone else, he is an important figure in this study.

He notes (p.216) the bad work of Dickens, but says that both Shakespeare and Wordsworth not only wrote an "enormous amount of bad work," they wrote "an enormous amount of enormously bad work," and if Dickens has written badly this should not prevent him from being seen as a great writer. He says (p.215), "That Dickens will have a high place in permanent literature there is, I imagine, no prig surviving to deny," and he feels that in future Dickens's place in the nineteenth century will not merely be high, it will be "altogether the highest." In the past, he has been ranked with Bulwer Lytton, Thackeray, Charlotte Bronte and "perhaps more," but whatever the

opinions now on these writers, Chesterton says, "I venture to offer the proposition that when more years have passed . . . Dickens will dominate the whole England of the nineteenth century; he will be left on that platform alone." These statements use some methods used by others, over the decades,of deciding Dickens's stature: comparison with other authors and references to posterity. Chesterton is more confident than most on Dickens's behalf, but he is no mere partizan, because he adds the qualification that his "disparagement of the other English Novelists is wholly relative and not in the least positive." Men will, he says, always read Thackeray, but Dickens will "bestride and dominate our time as the vast figure of Rabelais dominates . . . the Renascence and the world." This statement comes at the end of a period in which comparisons of this kind abound.

The preference for Thackeray among certain journals continues. The Dublin Review (April 1871), in a lengthy comparison of the two novelists, prefers the more intellectual and refined Thackeray. The reviewer says (p.322), that although most people would say Dickens was the greater of the two, the word "great" usually refers to his popularity, and he looks forward to the day when the majority shall be better educated and shall "reverse the popular verdict" in favour of Thackeray. The same kind of social and intellectual snobbery is seen in the London Quarterly Review (January 1871, p.272), which compares Dickens's satire with Thackeray's and finds that the latter's is "many degrees more refined." Although Dickens is vastly more popular, this only shows how mistaken, how tasteless and ignorant, the masses are, and the reviewer claims that he has never met a single person of high cultivation who regards Dickens as an artist in any respect. This "high-brow" preference continues to appear throughout the period. Mrs. Oliphant expresses it in her survey of the literature of the previous fifty years, in Blackwood's Magazine (June 1887, p.755). Dickens's best novels contain, along with their faults, "such

whimsical creations, and ever humorous, ever entertaining embodiments of character, as any age might be proud to have produced," but her preference lies clearly with Thackeray's "far more pervasive, delicate, and human" humour. Even in Knowledge (12 June 1885), an "Illustrated Magazine of Science," there is the beginning of a series of three weekly articles by Richard A. Proctor, which end (26 June, p.538) with the assessment that Thackeray's position in literature is "far higher" than Dickens's, and that recognition of this fact is growing "daily."

Much of this is a class as much as, if not more than, a literary reaction, as Shorter (1897, p.44) notes. Thackeray's fame has eclipsed Dickens's "in the minds of a certain literary section of the community," he says, and Thackeray with them stands for "culture" and Dickens for "illiteracy." And he adds (p.43) that it is the fashion with some to call Dickens "the novelist of the half-educated." This refers to Leslie Stephen's indictment (1888, p.935). Stephen says, "If literary fame could be safely measured by popularity with the half-educated, Dickens must claim the highest position among English novelists." "More severe critics," however, assert that "his merits are such as suit the half-educated. They admit his fun to be irresistible . . . (but) he writes too clearly for readers who cannot take a joke till it has been well hammered into their heads." And he concludes, "His books are therefore inimitable caricatures of comtemporary 'humours' rather than the masterpieces of a great observer of human nature. The decision between these and more eulogistic opinions must be left to a future edition of this dictionary." Generally, Stephen follows Lewes's arguments, in the Fortnightly Review (February 1872, reprint[48] p.62), and here echoes the feeling Lewes has that it is ignorance and lack of intellectual control

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48 loc.cit.

in readers that make Dickens so popular. Nicoll (1883, pp.387-88) sees a partial parallel between Dickens and Thackeray as novelists and Carlyle and Macaulay as historians, because Carlyle's admirers are found, like Dickens's, among "the less cultured classes." There are still counter attacks, such as Irving's decision (1874, reprint[49] pp.173-74) that Dickens, as a humorist, is much more attractive than Thackeray, the heartless satirist and wit. Buchanan, in St. Paul's Magazine (February 1872, p.148),is able to appreciate Thackeray's satire, but he prefers Dickens's "simple delightfulness" and says earlier in his article that it is "head and shoulders" over that of Thackeray, which is "radically unpoetic." Topp, in the Melbourne Review (July 1881, p.268), condemns as "very narrow criticism" that which attempts to set one author up above the other. There is no reason why one person should not admire them both,[50] he says. He finds (p.277) Thackeray's satire to be of a higher class, but is able to appreciate Dickens, without condescension, for his humour, fun and high spirits. As a satirist Dickens is measured according to his actual or potential effectiveness by most critics, but there is an expectation in some quarters that the satirist should be more harsh and vigorous, and Dickens is seen to be more funny than otherwise.[51]

Comparisons between Dickens and other authors abound in this later period in the century. Buchanan (pp.145-46), in bewildering fashion, compares Dickens favourably with a number of great names from the past. Having said that humour and love are "twin brothers," he adds, "there is more true humour, and consequently more helpful love, in the pages of Dickens than in all the writers we have mentioned put together; and . . .

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[49] loc.cit. See above, p. 244.

[50] Arnold Bennett, in T.P.'s Weekly (16 September 1904), repr. The Author's Craft ed. Samuel Hynes, p.237, illustrates another possibility, in dismissing both as "local poets."

[51] See above, pp.173,175-76 and below, p. 314.

in quality, the humour of Dickens is richer, if less harmonious, than that of Aristophanes; truer and more human than that of Rabelais, Swift, or Sterne; more distinctively unctuous than even that of Chaucer, in some respects the finest humorist of all . . . certainly inferior to that of Shakspere only." This high praise is like a summary of critical comparisons made by favourable critics during the century. Buchanan goes on to elaborate. He claims that Swift's humour was "of the earth, earthy; Gay's was shrill and wicked; Fielding's was judicial, with flashes of heavenlike promise; Smollett's was cumbrous and not spiritualising; Sterne's was a mockery and a lie . . . Scott's was feudal, with all the feudal limitations, in spite of his magnificent scope and depth." Because of his "love," Dickens is superior to all these. There is some objection here to these authors on moral grounds. It also appears faintly in Irving's comment mentioned above, and in Davey's comment (1876, p.155) on Sterne. Davey prefers Dickens because "He has none of the laughing, leering merriment, forced conceits, and stage clap-trap of Sterne, that profound master of double entendre, and most impiously impure writer in our language." The old moral objections to the eighteenth-century novelists are obviously lasting well, because Davey adds this to a comparison between Dickens and Smollett, in which he says (pp.154-55) that Dickens's "boisterous fun and good humour" are similar to Smollett's "with this advantage, that to find his best things we have not to go to a dunghill and scratch them out." He even finds Dickens in a way superior to Fielding. He has not Fielding's truth to nature and accuracy of description, but "there is a wider range of sympathy, a warmer glow of life, a more intense individuality of character, and a greater refinement of feeling" which will give his works a "longer vitality." Clearly, this tells us little about the relationship between these novelists and Dickens except that he is more Victorian than they are.

Fielding's greatest merit is felt, as ever, to be his truthfulness to universal nature, and he more than Smollett or any other novelist of the earlier century is the yardstick by which later novelists are measured. Forster (Life, II p.274) places Dickens near, but not above, Fielding when he says that the art which "can combine traits vividly true to particular men or women with propensities common to all mankind," an art which reached its "highest expression" in Fielding, was seen even in the first of Dickens's books. Dickens is not quite up to Fielding but he shares with him the most important characteristic, in Forster's eyes, that a novel may have. Forster usually stresses Dickens's truth to life, but he also pays tribute to his imaginative powers. Cross (1899, p.179) is sympathetic to realism, but he is tolerant of Dickens's tendency to allow his imagination to work on the manners and customs of his time and to lift them into "the world of the grotesque." Aware that this might appear to be adversely critical, Cross adds, "This has been the home of the very greatest humorists - the creators of Don Quixote, Falstaff, and Uncle Toby." Again, Dickens is by no means so high, but he is excused because he uses a similar method to writers whose stature is not questioned. This tendency to shelter Dickens under the wing of a greater author is illustrated also by Lang, in the Fortnightly Review (December 1898, p.950). He says, of Dickens's tendency to exaggerate, "the modern novelist and critic, who cannot forgive Dickens's tolerance, and protests in the sacred name of insulted Art and injured Nature, may go wage his war with Shakespeare for like offences. The world will decide in favour of Shakespeare's artistic instinct, as against the critic's artistic theory." Henley, in his Views and Reviews (1902, p.7), makes one of his periodic attacks on Lang who, he says, loves the comic in Dickens too much to be aware of his artistic merits. But he agrees with Lang that Dickens should not be blamed for his faults because Shakespeare had faults and they are not held against him.

But the adverse critics would say that Dickens's merits did not in any way compare with those of Shakespeare. Mrs. Oliphant, in Blackwood's Magazine (June 1871, p.675), goes further, and says that in the creation of character, Dickens is below Scott and Thackeray, and "not to ascend to any Shakespearian heights, there is not even such a light as Uncle Toby shining out of his pages." Dickens has described "every grade of the genius Fool" but he has been unable to portray exalted excellence. Harrison, in Forum (January 1895, p.545) agrees with this assessment. He too finds that Dickens, largely because of his caricature, is inferior to his predecessors. Scott shows "a more truly Shakespearian humour of the highest order," and Swift, Fielding, Hogarth, Sterne, and Goldsmith all "reached at times a more enduring level of humour without caricature." Dawson, near the end of the period, says (1905, p.112) that although Shakespeare and Fielding create comic characters, they never "overstep the modesty of nature." Dickens's comic characters, he says, are sustained by "all the tricks and artifices of the stage." Late in the period, it is still an insult to describe his work as being theatrical, despite improvements in English drama.

But the comparisons with Shakespeare go on. Henley, in the Pall Mall Magazine (August 1899, p.578), again objecting to Lang's approach to Dickens, says that "the genius of humour (if you will, the genius of farce) and the genius of romance, together with a well-nigh unrivalled capacity for presentation, whether comic or picturesque, are combined in Dickens as they are combined in nobody since Shakespeare." Swinburne, in the Quarterly Review (July 1902, p.20), adds his powerful voice to this kind of praise, when he places Dickens at the head of all English writers of the nineteenth century. Since there is no Shakespeare and no Hugo in the period, he says, no one can dispute Dickens's position. His humour, he claims (p.22), reminds "the appreciative reader" of

Shakespeare and perhaps of Aristophanes; and throughout his article, Swinburne makes frequent comparisons between Shakespeare and Dickens, and frequent attacks on readers - such as Lewes - who are not appreciative of his art. Most of those who make such comparisons refer to some aspect of characterisation - fecundity, vividness - or praise Dickens's creativity. His art is not placed on or near the level of Shakespeare's tragedy, for which there is higher regard, but there is a similar power of creative imagination in both as comic artists.

That there were faults in Dickens's work no one denied, and, like Topp, in the Melbourne Review (July 1881, p.276), most critics felt it necessary to point them out. Topp says that Dickens failed to develop his characters credibly. They either remain the same throughout or change too swiftly, as Micawber does, and Topp says, "This is a very serious failing, and one which no amount of inventive skill or super-abundance of humour can atone for." This suggests, as so many critics do, that Dickens's stature may be, in the end, limited, that the critic is unwilling to claim too much because of his uneasy awareness of the faults of the novels. That Dickens is good in a limited capacity may be expressed in many ways, but a number of critics are not even sure that the comedy is of the highest quality. The Spectator (29 December 1877, p.1651) claims that he is "one of the greatest humourists who ever lived," but only under a special definition of humour. Dickens can "accumulate round the thread of a particular grotesque idea an unrivalled wealth of apt and ever-brightening illustration," but in "the deepest sense" of the word "humour," - that which "springs from the subtler paradoxes of feeling" - he was not, according to the reviewer, a "creator of anything like the first order." Dickens was a great master "in his own way," but his own way was not the highest. Strangely, this uses similar terminology to

Hutton's[52] but denies Dickens the stature as a humorist that Hutton seems to give him. However, Hutton does vary his terms a little, for he says, in the Spectator (31 December 1892, p.95), that "in the rather special humour of personified caricature, even Shakespeare is not his equal," which suggests high stature in a limited field. Objecting to Lilly's (1895) lecture, Hutton says, in the Spectator (26 January 1895, pp.127-28), that Lilly dwells too much on Dickens's obvious vulgarity and pays too little attention to his strength, which in fact lies in his vulgarity inasmuch as it is based on the extravagance and shallow grasp of human nature which, Hutton always argues, constitute his strength as a humorist.[53] Even a favourable biographer such as Marzials (1887, p.45) does not claim very much for the humour. He admits that it may not be agreeable to the "superfine and too dainty critic," and says it is not that kind of humour which "for its rare and exquisite quality can be placed beside the masterpieces in that kind of Lamb, or Sterne, or Goldsmith, or Washington Irving," but nonetheless it is "very good humour" which is "the thoroughly popular humour of broad comedy and obvious farce." It is most concerned, Marzials says, with absurd characters and ridiculous situations, and is good, above all, for amusement. This suggests that the "superfine" critics are out of sympathy with Dickens's aims and methods, but it is not certain that Hutton's kind of assessment is not preferable to that of Marzials, who really claims very ordinary stature for Dickens.

Yet the superfine critics would say that the comic art of Dickens is not "serious". According to the Dublin Review (April 1871, p.323), Dickens's humour simply amuses and is "merely quite delightful" but he is not "seriously impressive." The London Quarterly Review (January 1871,

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[52] See above, pp.15-16. The article is not attributed to Hutton by any of the sources of information I have used.

[53] See above, pp.94,297.

p.266) finds that Dickens's comedy is of the kind which laughs at the physical characteristics of a neighbour. It is "obvious and broad," and the wit of the novels is "independent of cultivation in the reader." Mrs. Oliphant, in Blackwood's Magazine (June 1871, p.694), too, says that his "claims as a humorist, in the highest sense of the word, are limited, chiefly by the absence of that fine sense of moral excellence . . . which is like an ear for music, an unexplainable gift." Oddly, she concludes (p.695) by repeating that it is "the absence of . . . warm moral sentiment which limits him both as a satirist and humorist, giving him admission but to the threshold of the highest circle." What she means is lacking from Dickens's satire is the sharp disdain and loathing with which she says Thackeray attacks abuses and moral evils. Dickens is too playful, too unconcerned to be a great satirist. But except in the figures of Dick Swiveller and Mr. Macawber, she appears to have missed the qualities of love and sympathy that so many others find in Dickens's comedy. For James Oliphant (1899, p.46), the mere presence of humour ensures low artistic stature, and he says, in a statement reminiscent of Bagehot,[54] "Indeed there is too much of it from the artistic point of view; it outweighs the serious elements in his fiction." And for J.C. Watt, in Great Novelists: Scott, Thackeray and Dickens (1880, p.191), Dickens's tendency to produce "the boisterous laugh" rather than any subtler effect means that he is not one of the greatest humorists.

It is clear, however, that Dickens is regarded primarily as a humorist and his excellence in this field is said by many critics to compensate for his deficiencies elsewhere, not to make him a better artist, but to make him at least acceptable to a degree, to explain the appeal of his art to the critics and to the public. Comments hailing Dickens as a great humorist are numerous. Forster begins his Life (I p.3) saying

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[54] See above, pp.30,283.

that Dickens is "one of the greatest humorists that England has produced," and Hutton's influence[55] remains to the end of the period. Andrew Lang (1886, p.12) praises Dickens as a comic genius, and he follows this up in Good Words (April 1888, p.236) saying that Dickens is "unsurpassable" when "diversion is his aim," and in the Fortnightly Review (December 1898, p.959), calling him an "unrivalled humorist." Buchanan, in St. Paul's Magazine (February 1872, p.148), Kate Field (1871, p.63), Davey (1876, p.122), Swinburne, in the Quarterly Review (July 1902, p.20), and R.W.G. Hunter, in the Dickensian (January 1906, p.8), all pay tribute to his greatness as a humorist. All of these value the humour of the novels highly, but even those others who do not are forced to admit his power in this respect even if they deny him all other merits. Thus, the antagonistic George Bentley, in the Temple Bar Magazine (May 1873, p.177) says that as a humorist Dickens is "unrivalled in this age," although he goes on to state that as a moralist and politician Dickens was out of his depth. And Edward Dowden, in Transcripts and Studies (1896, pp.167-68)[56] praises the "inexhaustible comedy and farce" of the novels but ridicules the moral and social teaching of a man who, with life tingling at his fingertips, is limited by having "no sense of dissatisfaction with himself." If, as Ford says,[57] the novels of Dickens were seen as childish, the fact that they were seen as comic, and not necessarily the greatest comedy at that, also helped to limit their appeal to "serious" critics.

Because of the prolonged attacks on Dickens, there is naturally an interest in whether the novels will survive, and many studies have sections

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55 See above, pp.296ff.

56 His article on "Victorian Literature" was published originally in the Fortnightly Review (1887). See G.H. Ford, op.cit., pp.196-97, mentioned above, p.249.

57 op.cit., p.190.

or chapters devoted to the question. Ward's (1882) last chapter and Chesterton's (1906) are concerned with the future of Dickens, and articles such as Hutton's "How Long Will Dickens Hold His Place in the Future?" in the Spectator (31 December 1892), and Mallock's "Are Scott, Dickens and Thackeray Obsolete?" in Forum (December 1892), are common. Some critics, like Davey (1876, p.153) and the Scottish Review (December 1883, p.125), feel that it is still too soon to decide, and others, like Topp, in the Melbourne Review (July 1881, p.269),feel that he will probably live, or like Henley (1902, p.8), hope that he will. Henley hopes that rather simple effects[58] of the comedy will still be evoked by Dickens's works in future generations, and Dawson (1905, pp.122-23) in a similar vein, feels that Dickens will be great "so long as men know how to laugh at pure absurdity, to revel in the jovial fun of high spirits and audacious youth . . . to feel pity, mirth and love." This does not appear to claim very much for Dickens, but in fact Dawson is highly favourable to him. Dickens, he says, "takes his place with the immortals" because he is "a great creative artist." A little earlier (p.121) he says, "When criticism has uttered its last word about his faults, the element of caricature, farce and grotesque exaggeration in his characters, the greatest word of all remains to be spoken - they live." Dickens's creative imagination endows his characters with life.

Tributes to the imaginative, creative and vital qualities are common throughout his career, but especially in the 1890s and early 1900s they become even more frequent. Even Saintsbury (1895, p.134) notes that, although compared to Balzac's creation, Dickens's is a "magic lantern show rather than a human comedy," the individual figures in his work "have a vividness and vigour of life exceeding anything" in Balzac. Lilly (1895, p.18) says, similarly, that though it is true that many of Dickens's

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[58] See above, p. 175.

characters are "caricatures, monsters, deformities," they nevertheless "live in his pages by the power of his creative genius." Lilly prefers truthful art, but he cannot gainsay the power of Dickens's writing. David Murray, in My Contemporaries in Fiction (1897, p.15) points out that even when the characters in the novels are grotesque they are alive, and Lang, in the Fortnightly Review (December 1898, p.954), says that though there are now "hundreds of writers who, with conscious rectitude, avoid his technical errors," they do not have "the essential thing, the creative power." Griffin, in the Irish Monthly (October 1896, p.543), having objected to Dickens's many errors, admits that no matter how unreal the characters are, Dickens manages to make them "vital and real" so that the reader knows them as intimately as he does most of his acquaintances. The characters are not known in depth because they are not minutely analysed, but they are vivid creations. Thus something is salvaged for Dickens from the attacks on his imaginative powers conducted by Lewes in 1872, and by Mowbray Morris ten years later in the same journal, the Fortnightly Review (December 1882, pp.769-71). Morris says that Dickens only has fancy and not the higher power of imagination, and he substantially agrees with Taine's assessment. He ends (p.779) saying that the world will probably always laugh with Dickens, but he does not see much of a future for Dickens's fame as an artist because great art is produced by the imagination, not the fancy. Yet whether fancy or imagination, its power to make the characters real to the reader is noted by Morris (Collins p.609[59]) and by Brimley Johnson, in the Book Monthly (1906, p.236), and others.[60]

Many of these critics who speak of Dickens's creative powers and imaginative vitality do not refer simply to the comic, even though they

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[59] Not having immediate access to this review, I have also used the extract in Collins.

[60] See Chambers's Cyclopaedia of English Literature (1903, p.468) and Lord, in the Nineteenth Century (November 1903, p.780).

mention the names of Mrs. Gamp, Micawber, Pecksniff, Pickwick and other comic characters in support of what they say. What they find is that Dickens has imagination but it lacks control and direction, and opinions vary on his merits because some critics prefer realism, others appreciate invention but do not rate Dickens's achievement highly and for others the comic does not even seem to come into account as an artistic quality. Brimley Johnson hints (p.238) that the humour is inferior because it is not intellectual, but he does allow it some merit because it is "spontaneous, sympathetic and sustained." It is not one of the qualities which will make Dickens a great artist, but it is one of the lesser elements which keep alive the appeal of his works. The minimal importance of humour for the stature of a writer is also suggested by Lilly (1895, pp.4-9), because he shows that the difference between a great humorist and a great artist of any other kind is merely that the humorist treats his subject "playfully." Dickens has too much playfulness and too little artistic competence, and because of his tendency towards caricature and exaggeration, Lilly does not feel that he creates an ideal world which is superior to, yet at the same time a reflection of, the real world.

Dickens is claimed as an idealist in this as in other periods, and the term suggests tolerably high stature as well as a kind of poetic quality for Dickens's work, which in turn suggests high stature, because poetic literature is considered more highly than prose fiction. The arguments for Dickens's similarity to Shakespeare and other poets (Milton, Dante, Spenser), scattered throughout the criticism of the period surveyed, and the acceptances of his heightening of the real are all in some degree the attribution to Dickens of some kind of poetic quality. That Dickens is an original poet had been said by Felton, in the North American Review (January 1843, p.131), Poe had praised his creative

imagination, in Graham's American Monthly Magazine (May 1841, p.251), Forster, in the Examiner (8 October 1853, Collins p.290) had said that, like Fielding's,[61] Dickens's novels rise to the dignity of poems, and in the present period, Buchanan, in St. Paul's Magazine (February 1872, p.146) compares Dickens with a number of poets and places him above Thackeray the satirst because his work is more poetic. Swinburne, in the Quarterly Review (July 1902, p.24), calls Dickens a great comic poet and pays tribute to his creativity, but Chesterton is the first to place extended emphasis on the comic poetry of the novels.

To see Dickens as a poet is not new, but to emphasise the fact that comedy creates great poetry is, it seems, Chesterton's own valuable contribution. His sense of "poetry" is of something mystical or spiritual, and he argues that Dickens achieved it not by restraining his fancy, not by shaping his art, but by giving freedom to his creative powers, by creating the "impossible." He argues against most of the adverse criticisms which had been levelled at Dickens. He shows that Dickens is truthful in acceptable ways and that he need not be truthful in some of the more slavish ways of other novelists. He shows that Dickens was a practical teacher and reformer and that he offered more than mere sentimental optimism. He does not claim great intellect for Dickens, but he does not seem to think that intellect is supremely important, and stresses the imagination instead. And through all of his tactics, Chesterton does not lose sight of the fact that Dickens is a comic writer. From the point early in his book when he says (p.22) that "few now walk far enough along the street of Dickens to find the place where the cockney villas grow so comic that they become poetical," to the statement near the end (p.217) that "by his serious genius, I need hardly say, I mean his comic genius,"

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61 See the Preface to Joseph Andrews, on the argument for the novel as comic prose-epic.

Chesterton consistently - and persistently - stresses the importance of the comic. He defends Dickens against many of the charges that had been made against him at various times: Dickens has his personal faults, but he is a "divine" creator (p.24); his novels are constructed badly, but they are in fact not novels but fairy tales, myths or folklore (pp.66 ff); Dickens's popularity is no fault because it proves he has universality (p.86); his work is simple rather than complex, but perhaps this merely means that critics reject it because they cannot explain it (pp.91-92); and so on. Behind all of his wordplay, he is quite serious - and he thereby puts into practice as a critic what he believes Dickens does as an artist - in his attempt to rescue Dickens's reputation. The whole work is a gigantic defence of Dickens against adverse criticism, and Chesterton, in a situation that appeals to his love of paradox, defends Dickens with his most obvious, his most popular, and his most readily underrated artistic element.

Chesterton is in no doubt about Dickens's future: he will survive and he will dominate the nineteenth century.[62] This is not despite his comedy but because of it. For example, he says (p.114) that the "comic and fantastic" Martin Chuzzlewit will survive American Notes, the "serious book" on America, because Dickens has created the ideal democracy in the former, whereas the "serious" book only describes what existed. He defends this by asking "Who cares whether Aristophanes correctly describes Kleon, who is dead, when he so perfectly describes the demagogue, who cannot die?" Later, he says (p.218), that the argument that those who paint exact copies of the world are more likely to last than those who paint the impossible, is absurd.

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62 See above, p.305.

We do not know, he replies to this, whether Homer exaggerated when he created Achilles, but the fancy has survived the facts just as the fancy of Podsnap may survive the facts of English commerce. His sleight of hand is obvious in his use of the word "impossible," and the idea that Dickens creates universal truths is by no means new. His concluding argument (p.220) - the point from which he began, in fact - that Dickens describes the democracy as a world of free and yet funny men, is a matter of politics and history, but his emphasis on Dickens's "serious joy" is an important one, and although it is dressed up as philosophy and politics, its importance as a critical emphasis should not be ignored. There had been much concern in earlier periods whether comedy was "serious" or not. Wit, when it was not word-play, was seen to be a serious intellectual exercise which Dickens did not partake of; satire was clearly serious, but the critics found at times the danger of unwanted consequences; humour was always seen as being serious, because it was linked with pathos, with charity, sympathy and love, and with some degree of knowledge of human nature. Fun, farce, buffoonery and other kinds of comedy were mere means of diversion and relief. Chesterton emphasises as much as possible the purely comic and says that Dickens could not be serious unless he could first be permitted to be comic.[63]

The emphasis Chesterton places on creativity is probably his most crucial argument. It is important for him that Dickens was a creator. Dickens, he says (p.180), "did not point out things, he made them." Mr. Guppy - and again Chesterton chooses a minor comic character to prove a major point - may be disapproved of, but he is "a creation flung down like a miracle out of an upper sphere; we can pull him to pieces, but we

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63 See above, p.30.

could not have put him together." Dickens as creator is god-like and his creations call for admiration rather than criticism or appreciation. This places Dickens on the highest level and attempts to make him immune from reproach. Swinburne, in the Quarterly Review quoted above, attempts the same kind of thing: he begins with a description of the novelist as poet, who is ultimately seen as a god. This may be seen, of course, as merely high eulogy for Dickens in compensation for the low stature he is awarded by others, but the tendency to see the novelist as poet is a very old one. When Fielding described his novels as comic prose-epics he was in part attempting to gain for them a stature that the novel - and especially the comic novel - did not have at the time. That the novel ought to strive for the achievements of poetry is suggested by some of the important favourable criticisms of Dickens during the period surveyed. His work is compared to Shakespeare's because he is judged ultimately against the standard set by a great poet, and the method of idealism discussed so frequently by the critics, is more readily achieved by the poet than by the novelist who describes the everyday. Dickens, however, does not simply describe the everyday, and especially when his work was compared to that of the Realists and Naturalists, his creative powers became evident. The consideration of him as a poet occurred to critics at various points during the period surveyed, but the first to make any real effort to see him as a comic poet - to realise that the comic artist is capable of poetry - is Chesterton.

Conclusion

It is remarkable that what Dickens is early counselled to learn or to expunge from his art has been neither learned nor expunged by the end of his career. The "faults" that are briefly noted by early critics, hopeful that he will do better as he matures, are seen in fact to persist and even to worsen. Ironically, his early work which could have been

improved on, according to the early critics, becomes that for which he is most renowned, and it comes to be most liked because of its comedy. There Dickens gives rein to his most important gift and does not attempt to become the kind of writer which he is felt not to be intellectually or artistically gifted to become. Yet, the comedy is also the element by which his stature is seen to be limited. It is felt that the comic writer - or at least a comic writer of Dickens's kind - is inherently not a serious artist because he is too often in jest and because his work seems to offend against important critical demands. Attempts to argue against this kind of approach frequently show that Dickens is not a mere comic writer because there are a number of admirable non-comic qualities and effects in his work. Dickens could, of course, have had all of these qualities without being a comic artist, and what such critics do is to subordinate the comic to non-comic aspects, and in the process to lose sight of the comic. The most valuable kind of argument is that Dickens's comedy is an imaginative power, that he is an idealist, that his work is essentially poetic. But whatever claim is made, the fact that comedy is involved often seems to be felt to limit his stature as a serious artist. He would have been better if he had been a serious rather than a comic writer, his critics suggest, and it takes a Chesterton with an eye for paradox to show his contemporaries that seriousness and comedy may be combined, and that a comic writer may have a high stature on account of rather than despite his comedy.

Dickens is recognised as a comic writer, and towards the end of the period, his comedy - especially his humour - is felt to be his most important quality. Whether he is a great humorist seems generally settled in his favour by the time of the generation after his death, but there are a number who would say that he is only unrivalled in a particular line of comedy. His humour suffers a little because of a growing preference for

the intellectual in fiction, but if, as R.B. Martin[64] argues, there was a triumph of wit, there was also, in a sense, a triumph of the imagination. Insofar as wit appeals to the intellect, humour and other comic modes may appeal to the poetic, creative and imaginative faculties. Humour lost some ground as sentimentality, with which it was associated, went out of fashion, but the emotional connotations of the mode remained and Chesterton notably avoids using the term too frequently. Yet there seems to have been a compensatory emphasis on the imaginative qualities of humour. H.D. Traill (1897, pp.290-91), in a chapter entitled "The Future of Humour," likens humour to poetry in a general thesis: humour, like poetry, is "a habit of contemplating, and of being affected by, the facts of consciousness in a particular way. . . . Poetry unveils the hidden beauty, humour exposes the lurking incongruity, of these relations." The greatest triumph of the humorist is to "renew with humour those common things on which the careless eye of the world has rested, unsuspecting of their secret charm, a thousand times." This is the same in essence as Chesterton's emphasis on the common man like Toots who is found to be interesting even though he may be passed over by some as a fool, and it goes right back to some of the earliest appreciations of Dickens's power to heighten the real, to describe scenes that everyone had seen but had not seen so clearly until Dickens had described them.[65]

It is this kind of emphasis that, on the whole, achieves more than the common means of assessing stature, by comparison of Dickens with other writers, a practice which goes on for the whole of the period without really making much progress. Many of the other artists named by the critics satisfy their formal demands for great literature while Dickens

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[64] op.cit.

[65] See above, p. 46.

does not - they feel that he does not construct good plots, control his imagination, or describe universal humanity. Technically Dickens is rarely defended, but his excellence is felt - and often no more than felt - to lie elsewhere: in his comedy, which is linked to his imagination. Not all critics place high value on the imagination, and a number of them spurn Dickens for his lack of intellect and culture. He is no philosopher, they say, and no doubt Chesterton's retaliation did not satisfy them. But with Chesterton and those who prefigure him, more and more is being claimed for the comic novelist both generally and in the person of Dickens. Comedy is no longer merely a means of amusement, no longer colourful wrapping for something weightier and more important, no longer just the cause of "cheery optimism."

CONCLUSION

Criticism of Dickens's comic fiction during the period surveyed seems to go through a process that novel-fiction had once gone through. The novel was objected to because it was frivolous, and it had to prove its relevance to life and its usefulness. Dickens's comedy is often charged with being frivolous, and consequently critics spend a lot of time dignifying the comic by attaching it to acceptable non-comic elements such as morality, sympathy and charity. Few critics doubt the importance of comedy in Dickens's work, and if other elements such as pathos seem at times to be equally important, there is gradual acceptance, thanks to a continuing preference for the early Dickens, of the fact that he is a comic writer above all. This by no means ensures him high stature, because there is a strong vein of adverse criticism, almost from the beginning of his career, which is remarkably unvarying in its tenets. Dickens is uncultured, unintellectual, over-emotional, over-imaginative, and fit only for the amusement of the public to whom most of these critics consider themselves socially and intellectually superior. Dickens's comedy involves exaggeration, and this is probably its most glaring fault in the eyes of many critics. Early in the period, everyone hopes he will learn to be more faithful to life and nature, but as it becomes evident that this is not going to happen, there are developed critical arguments which accommodate a degree of exaggeration. Dickens comes to be seen as an artist with an abundance of imaginative and creative power which makes up for his technical deficiencies. Emphasis on his moral and social teaching never dies out, but slowly there is more importance given to his imaginative powers. Interest in his personality and character is always strong, and it in fact increases during the period. There is always a suspicion that the fiction is the expression of the man, and after

Forster's biography it becomes a downright conviction. The main trend is towards evaluation, and most of the matters discussed above tend in the direction of the final chapter. Fiction that reflects life, either accurately or imaginatively heightened, is felt to be superior to that which does not. Fiction with a purpose or with some kind of statement about life is felt to be better than that which seeks merely to amuse. Success or failure is explained by reference to the author's personal capabilities.

Dickens's comedy - most especially his humour - is felt to be important. Few critics doubt its importance, but equally few give him high stature as a novelist on account of his comedy. Comedy, it is felt, may be important in Dickens, but it is not really valuable as a literary quality. Those who defend Dickens's comedy may, like Forster in many of his reviews in the Examiner, end up talking of more "serious" underlying matters such as morality and imagination, or they may, like Hutton in most of his articles in the Spectator, give high praise to the comic in Dickens yet suggest that no matter how high he is rated as a comic novelist, he does not reach the highest level as a novelist or literary artist. Chesterton in a way combines Forster and Hutton and says that Dickens is both a great comic writer and a great literary artist. Shrewdly, Chesterton seems to pinpoint what it was that had been worrying critics for so long: whether comic writing could also be accepted as serious writing. The importance of comedy for Dickens had long been recognised, but an assessment of its value for Dickens as literary artist finds its fullest expression in the period in Chesterton's work, at the end of seventy years of criticism. It seems strange, however, that so many of the great Victorian novels contain comic elements, yet comedy is viewed cautiously and often suspiciously by many of the critics of the greatest comic novelist of the era.

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Abbreviations used are generally in accordance with the MLA Style Sheet, but I have modified its recommendations for punctuation. A line in place of the reviewer's name indicates that it is a further article by the writer of the preceding article. Where no author is mentioned, the article is anonymous. The titles of novels are abbreviated.

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